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Creating an atmosphere of intellectual superiority: Islamic missionary work in Kenya as staged competition in a climate of religious diversity

Tabea Scharrer

ABSTRACT

This article deals with a very visible form of Islamic missionary work in Kenya: the public comparison of the Bible and the Qur'an. The argumentative structure of these public debates share many similarities with highly standardised narratives about becoming Muslim in the East African region, told by both converts and non-converts. I argue that these public debates (*mihadhara*), organised by groups following the ideas of the South African Ahmed Deedat, such as the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* (Preachers of Islam) and Islamic Propagation Centres, resemble staged spectacles or ritualised competition, aiming to demonstrate the superiority of Islam. These public representations take place in a climate of religious (and also political and economic) competition between various Christian and Islamic movements, in a country where Muslims form an influential minority which, however, perceives itself as marginalised. Thinking along these lines also explains why the audience for this 'narrative of superiority' is not necessarily the 'other' but often the own group, no matter whether the narrative is told by converts as an enactment of their conversion or by both converts and non-converts as a medium in this competition. *Mihadhara* and conversion narratives are part of the same style of Islamic missionary work, creating an atmosphere of 'intellectual superiority'.

Introduction

This article demonstrates how two apparently distinct practices in the context of Islamic proselytising—collective public preaching and individual accounts of conversion to Islam—are linked by the same figures of speech and aesthetic principles. As both intertwined practices are situated in a field of religious and socio-political competition, their influence spreads far beyond the Muslims who are part of missionary activities.

Focusing on Kenya and using the example of the widespread practice of comparing Bible and Qur'an in public places (*mihadhara*, sing. *mhadhara*—the Swahili word for 'lecture'), I show that this way of presenting Islam constitutes a specific aesthetic style (Meyer 2009, 10). This style consists, on the one hand, of particular arguments which are reiterated in narrations of conversion as an intellectual endeavour. On the other hand, this aesthetic style comprises sensory knowledge picked up during the *mhadhara* and its distinct atmosphere (Böhme 2001, 45–58; Riedel 2019), evoking a sense of intellectual superiority in the Muslim spectators. Given its focus on atmosphere and aesthetic style, this article contributes to the resurging literature about affective and emotional aspects of religion (Riis and Woodhead 2010; Pype 2012; Dilger et al. 2020).

Situating this aesthetic style and its evocation of intellectual superiority in a field of religious and socio-political competition in the Kenyan context, I furthermore argue that it affects Islamic missionaries as well as Muslims in general as a reassurance of the strength of Islam, despite a perceived marginalisation of Islam relative to Christianity. In addition, I suggest that *mihadhara* as 'staged competition' give the grievances a ritualised recourse that in effect lowers religious tensions.

Mihadhara, public meetings during which the relative virtues of the Bible and the Qur'an are discussed, take place in very different forms and are arranged by various Muslim groups with different ideas about interpreting Islam. Among them are the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* (Preachers of Islam) who established this practice. Later, activists working under the labels of "Islamic Propagation Centre" (IPC) or "comparative religion" organised *mihadhara*; even the *Tablighi Jama'at*, a Muslim lay movement from South Asia, have used this technique for missionary work (personal interview, Badia, Nakuru, 3 March 2005). That means that the actual theological and political positions of the different groups organising *mihadhara* vary considerably. At the same time, the arguments, examples, and figures of speech used during these public meetings are very similar.

In interviews about conversion to Islam which I carried out in Kenya with Muslim converts, preachers, and members of Muslim congregations, this style of missionary work was often mentioned and the arguments made during these meetings played an important role in the conversion accounts.[1] The same arguments and figures of speech can also be found in texts written for missionary work. However, this way of talking about conversion to Islam was used not only by converts themselves, but also by almost all Muslims when they discussed Christianity and conversion to Islam with me. Furthermore, *mihadhara* often take place in areas inhabited mainly by Muslims, at the coast or in urban places in the interior, such as Muslim suburbs or the areas around mosques. This results in an apparent contradiction between presenting this practice as a form of missionary work directed towards Christians and it being

enacted frequently in Muslim areas. Also, missionary texts using the motif of comparing Bible and Qur'an circulate widely among Muslims.

The article first outlines the background of Muslim missionary endeavours in Kenya by showing that the religious landscape in the country is marked by widespread competition in which Muslims perceive themselves as marginalised, not only in the religious sphere, but also politically and economically (Kresse 2009; Ndzovu 2014, 65–78). In the next step, I introduce the narrative of 'conversion as intellectual endeavour', the argumentative structure of which is intertwined with that of the public comparison of the Bible and the Qur'an. The roots of this missionary technique, introduced by the movement of the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu*, will then be presented in detail. In the last section, I argue that both the public preaching and the individual discussion of conversion to Islam are part of the same 'aesthetic style' (Meyer 2009), which not only consists of specific lines of argument, but also contains sensory elements, which together evoke an atmosphere of 'intellectual superiority'. Following Hermann Schmitz, I treat atmosphere as emotions spread out in space (2009, 57–60) and thereby inducing emotional coherence (Riedel 2019, 90). This interpretation leads to the conclusion that, although *mihadhara* and narratives about conversion are missionary practices, their popularity is not so much rooted in proselytisation itself, but rather in the sense of intellectual superiority these practices create on a symbolic level, in a field of inter-religious competition and in a situation of perceived marginalisation.

This article is based on anthropological fieldwork in various urban areas in Kenya (Nakuru, Kisumu, Mombasa, Nairobi) between the mid-2000s and 2018, at first concentrating on Islamic missionary movements and conversion to Islam (with a focus on biographical conversion narratives) and later on the role of Muslim congregations for Somali migrants in Kenyan cities. During this time I came across five public preaching sessions in Kenya and watched more than ten video-recorded *mihadhara* which had either been distributed among Muslims or posted online (e.g. on YouTube). These filmed sessions were produced in Kenya as well as in Tanzania, some of them featured not only in public but also in closed meetings and they were usually bigger than those I had witnessed myself (when usually only one or two preachers were active).

The Kenyan religious field

Like other multi-religious countries, Kenya has experienced a tremendous rise in organised religious missionary activities in the last 40 years, when Christian, especially Pentecostal, groups as well as Muslim missionary movements tried to gain new adherents. This dynamic was stimulated by increased external funding from Christian and Muslim sponsors as well as by internal political and economic uncertainty in the 1980s and 1990s, against the background of an

at first authoritarian political system and later the introduction of multi-party politics and structural adjustment programmes. As a result, there is a high diversity of religious groups active in the country, even encompassing groups categorised as 'new religious movements', such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness or ISKCON (founded in New York in 1966). This development has led to a state of religious competition and intra-religious tension comparable to other African countries where neither Christians nor Muslims form an absolute majority, such as Nigeria (see Loimeier 2007, 137–138). It also means that religion is highly prevalent in the public sphere.

Until recently, religious competition between Christians and Muslims in Kenya rarely resulted in "serious episodes of violence" (Oded 2000, 102). Even in cases in which violence was explained by religious arguments—such as the political fight of the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) in the coastal areas in the 1990s, the burning of at first a mosque and then a church in the Nairobi district of South B in 2000 (after some traders were driven out of the compound of the mosque) (*Daily Nation* 2000), and the bombing of a church in Garissa (northeastern Kenya) in 2012 (which had more to do with the Kenyan army invading Somalia the year before)—this kind of violence was selective and confined and therefore quite different from the fights that took place after the elections in 2007, when over 1,100 people were killed. This argument also holds true by and large when looking at the violent acts attributed to the Somalia-based militant Islamic group al-Shabaab in Kenya since 2011. Even if, in some cases, Christians were singled out by Muslims (as was, for instance, the case in the attack of Garissa University in 2015), this strategy was not always successful due to the opposition of Muslims, for example, during an attack against bus passengers in December of the same year (BBC 2015).

The proportion of Christian and Muslim inhabitants is nonetheless discussed in highly controversial terms, as it is linked not only to religious competition but also to claims to political, economic, and social participation. According to the contested census of 2009—especially concerning Somalis, one of the major Muslim groups (see Weitzberg 2015; Scharrer 2018)—about 11% of the 38.6 million Kenyan inhabitants identified as Muslim, while about 82.5% subscribed to one of the various Christian denominations. The vast majority of Muslims in Kenya are Sunni, coming from various parts of the population, the most visible groups being coastal Swahili, the Somali population concentrated in north-eastern Kenya, Nubians (who came with the colonial British army and claim descent from Sudan) as well as South Asians (the first of them having settled in East Africa before the British colony was created). There are smaller populations of up-country Muslims, some originating from Mumias, an area that had already become Muslim in pre-colonial times, and in urban centres, such as Nakuru or Eldoret situated in the Western part of the country, where more recent

converts to Islam live. The small Shia community is almost exclusively composed of people belonging to the South Asian minority. These various regional, ethnic, and socio-cultural backgrounds of Muslims in Kenya result in a high heterogeneity of the Islamic field in the country (Ndzovu 2014, 7), often leading to a sense of disunity (Mwakimako 2007, 53). The proportion of Christians and Muslims differs regionally. While Muslims form the majority on the coast and in the sparsely populated north-east, the ratio is inverted up-country where Christian groups dominate. This also means that in the Kenyan hinterland the minority position of Muslims is even more pronounced than at the national level.

Before colonialisation, Islam had been established as the religion of the urban élite and of the Omani sultan in the coastal regions of East Africa (Loimeier 2013, 210–247). From the colonial era onwards, however, it gradually developed into a minority religion—one that in the eyes of many Muslims is marginalised politically and economically (Ndzovu 2014, 3). At the same time, Christianity gained in numerical strength, becoming the more influential religion in Kenya, with a high prevalence even in the coastal areas, and thus reinforcing "historical tensions between coast and upcountry" (Kresse 2009, 78). Among Muslims, the perception of belonging to a socio-economically and culturally marginalised as well as politically under-represented group is widespread (Mwakimako 2007, 46–55), especially on the coast (Eisenberg 2013, 189), feeding on both local and global discourses of Muslim marginalisation (Chome 2019). These sentiments are voiced regularly in Muslim publications, such as the weekly *Friday Bulletin* (published by the "Committee of the Jamia Mosque" in Nairobi and distributed to many mosques in the country). The perceived marginalisation is exemplified by different topics, such as the under-development of areas inhabited by Muslims and the violation of Muslim rights due to the war on terror (Wandera and Wario 2019, 210–212).

The most active Islamic missionary movements since the 1980s have been groups influenced by Wahhabi and Salafi ideas, the *Tablighi Jama'at* with roots in South Asia, the Shiite "Bilal Muslim Mission", supported by Iran, and the locally developed movement of the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu,* who introduced the *mihadhara* as public events of Bible–Qur'an comparison. The institutionalisation of organised Islamic mission (as *dawah*), whether focusing on conversion of non-Muslims or on propagating specific ideas within the Islamic communities, is a relatively new phenomenon, developing globally in relation to the growing competition with Christian missionary movements from the nineteenth century onwards (see Janson 2002; Racius 2004, 6–7) and starting in Kenya in the 1960s (Bakari 1995).

What has further changed is the role classic Islamic knowledge plays in this process. The representation and interpretation of Islamic knowledge are no longer only ascribed to conventionally educated Islamic scholars, as some movements see all Muslims in the position to undertake this task. Many

activists in the Islamic missionary movements in Kenya have not learned in a *madrassa* and instead obtained their knowledge about Islam from booklets, audiotapes, and sermons of preachers in the mosque (Scharrer 2013, 310–311). Furthermore, some Muslims in Kenya interpret *dawah* as the duty of every believer. This idea was promoted especially by the *Tablighi Jama'at*, which is known for its groups of lay preachers. Najib, for example, told me that *dawah* was one of the 'pillars' of Islam (personal interview, Najib, Nakuru, 25 May 2004).[2] Nadeem, who was active with Najib in the *Tablighi Jama'at* in the Kenyan Rift Valley, stated that God punished every Muslim who did not try to proselytise (personal interview, Nadeem, Nakuru, 21 March 2005).[3]

Islamic missionary movements stand not only in competition with Christian proselytising endeavours, but also with other locally established practices of Islam—especially Sufi practices have regained influence in the last ten years (Ahmed 2018, 10)—and established Muslim scholars and networks. Moreover, they also compete with each other.

When looking closer at the numbers of religious adherence, it seems that the ratio between Christians and Muslims has not changed considerably in the last couple of years. Therefore, conversions or movements of people to groups with different religious interpretations and practices are probably stronger within Christianity and Islam than between them. In Nakuru, for instance, the fourth biggest city in Kenya, the Muslim community grew substantially between 1995 and 2010, from under 5,000 people to about 18,000 (personal interview, chairman of the Muslim Association of Nakuru, 19 October 2011). According to the census data from the same period, the city's population also grew significantly, from around 190,000 to about 320,000 people.[4] At first glance, the increase in the Muslim population seems impressive. When it is, however, taken into account that almost half of the new members of the Muslim community were Somali migrants (mostly from north-eastern Kenya), the increase in the number of Muslims compared to the overall population is only slightly greater and conversion as the only explanation becomes questionable.

The internal competition for followers also means that contention and hostility between and within Islamic congregations are often stronger than the rivalry displayed in regard to Christian churches. Nonetheless, Christianity as the significant 'other' religion plays an important role in the self-presentation of the different Islamic missionary movements and the disputes between them as well as in the narratives of conversion to Islam as an intellectual endeavour used by individuals.

Conversion to Islam as an intellectual endeavour

In interviews with converts to Islamic missionary movements in East Africa in the mid-2000s, all the 25 male interview partners (most of whom had converted

from Christianity to Islam) used the same narrative of conversion to Islam as an 'intellectual endeavour' to talk about their experiences.[5] They referred to a great interest in religion since childhood, being unsatisfied with what they found in the religious community they grew up in, mainly in terms of knowledge and behaviour, their quest for learning more about different religions, and their gradual understanding that only in Islam could they find the truth and satisfaction they were looking for (see also Wandera 2015). Given this understanding, conversion became the only option. A sudden crisis or experience which led to conversion hardly ever played a role in these narrations. I argue elsewhere (Scharrer 2013, 360–363) that the fact that no sudden conversion experience was mentioned does not make it any less a conversion. It is rather the result of a specific way of narrating conversion experiences, shaped by the missionary movement people are converting to and therefore varying over time and space. However, this narrative was also used by converts who became Muslims after a rather short period of time.

The gradual learning process was narrated as the careful study of the Bible and Christianity, even when the religious change occurred within Islam. The way of narrating Islamic conversion as a learning process and as comparison between Christianity and Islam resembles one prominent form of missionary work in East Africa, the 'comparing' of Bible and Qur'an in public places, which will be discussed in the following sections.

'Comparative religion'

The foundations for the practice of publicly comparing Bible and Qur'an in Kenya were laid by Muslims from Western Tanzania, who used the street preaching known from Christian missionaries and changed it into a method of Islamic missionary work in the 1980s (Ahmed 2008, 5–7). Overtly, this missionary practice, which Kenyan Muslims also call 'Islamic propagation', 'comparative religion' or 'Muslim–Christian dialogue', focuses on the conversion of Christians to Islam.

This form of proselytisation mainly developed out of two influences, both closely linked to South Asia. A number of the founders of the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* were influenced by the Ahmadiyya movement (Lacunza-Balda 1993, 229–230; Ahmed 2008, 5–6), which came from India to Tanzania in the 1930s and used the polemical deconstruction of Christian texts for proselytisation, a method developed in confrontation with Christian preachers in India. The *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* were, however, not founded until 1984 (since 1990, they are known as "Union of Muslim Preachers of Comparative Religion" or UWAMDI; in Swahili, *Umoja wa Wahubiri wa Kiislamu wa Mlingano wa Dini*), after a presentation by the South African preacher Ahmed Deedat in Dar es Salaam (Chesworth 2006, 169). His missionary activities were likewise influenced by the style of South Asian

religious polemics (Sadouni 2013, 54–56). Deedat's publications, carrying titles such as *What the Bible Says about Muhammed*, have been widely distributed in East Africa by his own "Islamic Propagation Centre International" since the 1960s and are still known to many Muslims in the region.

In contrast to other Islamic missionary movements as well as to *ulama* (scholars), those practising 'comparative religion' preach outside the mosques in public places, such as markets, parks, bus stations, and even big stadiums. The main language of the public discussions and preaching is Swahili; Arabic or English is not used frequently. This could be attributed to the group's origin in East Africa, in contrast to the other Islamic missionary movements. In addition, audio and video recordings of these public events, sold or published on the internet, circulate among Muslims.

Although the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* started preaching in Tanzania, their preaching method of the *mhadhara* became widespread in Kenya, especially in bigger cities like Nairobi, Kisumu or Nakuru. Interestingly, however, *mihadhara* are not mainly organised in the Christian hinterland of Kenya, but in areas inhabited predominantly by Muslims, such as Mombasa (Ahmed 2008, 8) and the 'Somali' neighbourhood of Eastleigh in Nairobi (Jansen 2018, 102–107). This could be explained by the presence of a Christian population in these areas. Another possible interpretation, foregrounded in this article, focuses on the promotion of self-esteem for the Muslim communities.

Debate or theatre: the structure of a *mhadhara*

In Kenya, two forms of publicly comparing Bible and Qur'an can be distinguished, although both are called *mhadhara* by Muslims. One follows the example of Ahmed Deedat, whose Bible–Qur'an comparisons and discussions with Christian preachers took the form of lectures. Outside East Africa, this practice has been emulated, for instance, by Zakir Naik, a television preacher in India (Sadouni 2013, 64–69). The other form—the *mhadhara* in a stricter sense—seems to be an innovation by the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* and, with its constant questioning and answering, resembles more a debate or a competition between Christians and Muslims and may even develop into a battle of words. With its emphasis on rhetorical skills, it echoes older forms of competitive oral poetry (see Haugerud 1995, 69). The following description of these gatherings focuses on the second form. Although it requires more organisational effort than the first and is therefore not as frequently held, it serves as the archetype for smaller gatherings.

The course of action during a *mhadhara* is highly standardised, appearing more like a performance or a theatre play than an open-ended discussion. A Kenyan scholar, for instance, describes *mihadhara* as staged:

> During the *mihadhara*, itinerant Muslim preachers mount huge public address systems and engage fellow Muslims or followers of other religion [sic] in a 'debate', 'discussion', 'dialogue' or 'competition' on religious topics. (Mwakimako 2007, 22)

On a stage or in the middle of the gathering, two men, representing Islam and Christianity, sit together at a table. One is clearly marked as Muslim by his dress (wearing a *kofia* or a turban and often a *kanzu*, which is a robe), the other is typified as Christian by wearing Western clothes. In front of them lie copies of the Bible and the Qur'an. Another man stands or sits opposite them and asks questions about the interpretation of certain principles of faith and about practising religion, which the two men try to answer with the help of 'their' holy text. During the course of the event, these (male) discussants might be replaced with other speakers to continue the discussion. From time to time, the man representing Christianity is cross-examined by the other two men. They try to entangle him in contradictions and to show that he does not know the Bible as well as his Muslim counterpart, who sometimes reads or recites from the Bible himself. Citations from the Bible or the Qur'an, especially when recited from memory, are highly appreciated by the audience; for them, this proves the knowledge of the discussants and hence their religiosity. The 'Christian' discussant is in many cases presented as being somewhat helpless and not as well prepared as his Muslim counterpart. My interviewees attributed the inconsistent arguments of the Christian discussant not only to his weaker knowledge, but also to contradictions in the Bible, especially in contrast to the Qur'an. During bigger meetings, people in the audience step up from time to time and indicate their wish to convert to Islam, resulting in cheers from the public. After that they speak the *shahada* (the declaration of faith) in Swahili and/or Arabic by repeating the words after the preacher and thus immediately become Muslims. Concerning these conversions, there have been rumours that in a number of cases these are actually Muslims pretending to be converts. This idea was expressed by several Muslim intellectuals in Kenya (personal communication, Hassan Mwakimako, 19 July 2011).

Most of the followers of the big events are Muslims. According to Hassan Mwakimako, whose research team interviewed more than 1,000 Muslims in Kenya, almost two thirds of interviewees stated that they always attended *mihadhara* when they took place; another 30% attended these meetings occasionally and only 6% had never been to a *mhadhara* (Mwakimako 2007, 23). This shows that *mihadhara* are well known and very popular among Muslims. Depending on the occasion and the area where the meeting takes place, Christians are also among the audience. They are curious about the arguments and the outcome of the staged debate. Furthermore, these meetings constitute a kind of break in the daily routine and a challenge.

The audience watches the performance attentively and comments in certain situations. People cheer and react with victory poses, raising their arms or

clenching their fists when the Muslim discussant manages to unsettle his Christian counterpart visibly. In some instances, the moderator calls *takbir*, as a prompt for a reply using the formula *Allahu akbar* ('God is great' or 'God is (the) greatest'), which is answered accordingly by the public. Angelique Haugerud describes similar exchanges of slogans in political public assemblies (*baraza*) as establishing "emotional identification between speaker and audience" (1995, 71). Chanfi Ahmed comments that "The ambience during a *mhadhara* is always theatrical, full of word-battles and jokes. Listening to the Muslim preachers can be great fun." (2008, 11) At the same time, the participants quickly return to an earnest and respectful dispute between representatives of two religions that are more or less treated as on par with each other.

The debates revolve around specific questions and views, which also play a highly important role in narratives of conversion as 'intellectual endeavour'. One main topic is the Christian idea of the Trinity, which is equated with polytheism. In particular, the idea of Jesus as God's son serves as a demarcation line between Islam and Christianity. Indeed, many Pentecostal churches focus on the equation of 'Jesus is God' (see Gifford 1987, 71). For Muslims in contrast, Jesus (or Isa) is a prophet who did not die on the cross. The emphasis on monotheism and the rejection of the idea of the Trinity can be found in the Qur'an, but gained in importance with the rise of the Wahhabi interpretation. Here, the idea of *tawhid* (oneness of God) became central for criticising Islamic practices such as the veneration of holy men or the celebration of *mawlid*, the birthday of the prophet Mohammed (see El Fadl 2007, 46–51).

To prove that Islam is the real fulfilment of God's word (in contrast to Christianity), the Bible is used to show that Mohammed was already prophesised in it. As Islam is seen as the true and original religion, differences between the Bible and the Qur'an, both assumed by the respective congregations to be God's word, have to be explained. Therefore, it is argued that, in contrast to the Qur'an, the Bible was corrupted by human influence (an argument again based on verses in the Qur'an). In this respect, especially St. Paul is mentioned as having altered the Bible, but also an anti-Semitic argument of jealous Jews having destroyed the Bible was narrated in one interview. Another idea that plays a role in these discussions is that additional gospels shedding a different light on Jesus (especially the so-called 'Gospel of Barnabas')[6] were not included in the canon of the New Testament. Therefore, Muslim activists characterise the Bible as a collection of *hadith* rather than the original word of God. As further evidence that, in contrast to the Bible, the Qur'an is really God's word, passages from the latter are interpreted as scientific statements not known at the time when the Qur'an came into being.[7] Furthermore, discrepancies in the Bible, such as the differences in presenting the day of crucifixion in the four gospels, are

seen as confirmation for its corruption or fictitiousness and many discussions revolve around these contradictions.

These arguments are also used in narrations about conversion to Islam (see Chesworth 2007, 171–176). Furthermore, numerous booklets, pamphlets, and audio and video recordings circulate among Muslims, in which the same arguments can be found. Besides locally produced texts, some of them distributed only in small personal networks, and the already mentioned works by Ahmed Deedat, other publications are disseminated in East Africa, by globally known authors such as Bilal Phillips as well as texts released, for example, by the Saudi-Arabian embassy or the Shiite Bilal Muslim Mission.

The position of the *mhadhara* in the field of Christian–Muslim interaction

In the early 1980s, the public events of the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* had already led to controversies with Christian groups. The latter accused Muslim preachers of causing disturbances, assaulting Christian teachings in the Bible, and offending Christianity in general. Muslims interpreted these reactions as fear from the Christian side that 'comparative religion' could result in more conversions to Islam.

The preaching events can also lead to tensions with the local population. Bilal, one of the first to start this preaching method in the Kenyan Rift Valley in 1992 (he called it 'Christian–Muslim dialogue'), told me that many of the street preachers in the 2000s did not strike the right chord and were at times chased away by people throwing stones at them (personal interview, Bilal, Nakuru, 3 June 2004). Joseph Wandera reports on a *mhadhara* which was stopped by the police (2015, 29).

Mihadhara are criticised not only by Christians (Jansen 2018, 109–110), but also by Muslims (Ahmed 2008, 12). On the one hand, many Muslims see the potential for conflict with the Christian communities and possible implications in the political arena—conflicts they would rather avoid in order not to endanger national unity and further marginalisation of Muslims. On the other hand, activists of other Islamic groups, who see the *Wahubiri* as unwanted religious competition, criticise the narrow knowledge and the behaviour of the preachers. Abdullah, who had studied at an Islamic centre on the Kenyan coast after his conversion, condemned the preachers for just "trying to sell Islam". After listening to them "you would be convinced that Jesus was Muslim but did not wash". (Personal interview, Abdullah, Nakuru, 21 March 2005). He especially criticised that they used only a few particular verses of the Bible. Abdullah denounced this preaching method as a way of earning money, as just a job instead of *dawah* arising from religious motivation, as—according to him—it was generously sponsored by wealthy local and non-local (e.g. Saudi) business people. Therefore, for him, these

movements were not about knowledge and learning, but about convincing others—a kind of marketing strategy. Accordingly, he criticised these groups for not following 'true Islam' which he characterised as very rational and only to be learned by studying, thus ruling out quick conversions. Isa, whom I met in Kisumu in 2005, criticised 'comparative propagation' in a different way: "Islam is not to be propagated through the microphone but through life" (personal interview, 5 April 2005), which was in line with the ideas of the *Tablighi Jama'at* where he was very active.

Both criticisms revolve around the issue of knowledge of the Qur'an and the *hadith* as well as the knowledge of the right practices (which also requires a pure motivation) resulting from these sources. This kind of criticism was mainly voiced by Muslims influenced by Islamic missionary movements from the coast or from outside gaining influence. The *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* in contrast are the only successful Islamic missionary movement in East Africa which moved from the interior to the coastal areas—geographically constituting a counter-movement. Developing out of a peripheral area, this movement gained ground at the former centre of Islamic authority in the region. This plays into foregrounding issues of knowledge as central to question this movement, which is seen as competition over the authority of Islamic interpretation by coastal Muslims who had, until the 1980s, dominated the discussions.

This is part of a larger intra-Islamic conflict in East Africa, often splitting Muslim communities along regional and ethnic lines—here between *ulama* from the coast and the northeast, partly embedded in Sufi orders and frequently from Arab as well as Somali families, and (new) Muslims from the African hinterland. This means that the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* brought about a contestation of truth not only between Christians and Muslims, but also between an established Muslim leadership and a previously marginalised group of Muslims. Having better knowledge is here also seen as a sign of superiority, leading to the assessment that a conversion triggered by this group is worth less than other forms, as it does not include a long learning process and can therefore only last for a short time. The counter-argument of newly converted Muslims from the hinterland is that they are in fact better Muslims. They have made a conscious decision to be Muslim and they know the Bible; therefore, they know one more of the God-given texts than other Muslims, even if it was altered by humans (see also Wandera 2015). Some of the converts narrated their conversion as triggered by a *mhadhara*. Tariq, one of these converts, argued that those knowing both books are much more successful in their missionary work as, in contrast to other Muslims as well as Christians, they have an advantage of knowledge (personal interview, Tariq, Nakuru, 31 May 2004).

While many researchers (e.g. Wandera 2015, 39–40; Jansen 2018, 109–111) conclude that the *mihadhara* mainly result in further tensions and conflicts,

Ahmed (2008, 12-13) argues that there are other effects as well. For many people, these events are their first opportunity to learn something about another religion, even if only in the form of a provocative discussion.

Christian counterparts also take part in these debates, trying to defend their position. Especially preachers and members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but also of the Jehovah's Witnesses or Pentecostal churches feature in the debates. The invitation of Christian preachers, however, depends on the size of the *mhadhara* and during smaller events only one or two Muslim speakers talk. The Christian counterparts are often laymen (see Wandera 2015, 27–28), although the Seventh-day Adventist Church appears to have special trainings for these occasions (Jansen 2018, 107).

Regardless of how the effects of the *mihadhara* are interpreted, they are highly popular among East African Muslims. The religious comparison established by the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* has found many imitators among Muslims. Most of my interviewees thought that *mihadhara* were a very successful method of missionary work. For the majority, it did not matter how people made the decision to convert as long as they became Muslims. Contrary to the criticism concerning the knowledge of the preachers, many Muslims describe them as well-educated young men with very convincing arguments. In addition, many Muslim scholars have picked up this method to profit from its popularity (Ahmed 2008, 12).

In the interviews about conversion I carried out, the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* did, surprisingly, not feature prominently. On the one hand, *mihadhara* were considered as normal and therefore did not deserve much discussion. In addition, many interviewees discussed *mihadhara* as a-political and as having less conflict potential than the messages spread by groups influenced by Wahhabi and Salafi ideology (although there was some overlap). On the other hand, *mihadhara* were often not organised by the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu*, but by various other groups which again use different terms for this kind of public missionary work. These terms—*dawah*, *tabligh* ('to preach') or 'Christian–Muslim dialogue'—appear much more often in the interviews and obscure what kind of preaching or staging they refer to.

As shown in the first part of the article, the *Tablighi Jama'at* established the idea that *dawah* is a duty for every Muslim. It seems that, while the *Tablighi Jama'at* effectively puts the focus on *dawah* as every Muslim's duty, the *Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* gave this duty a format, a way to carry it out.

Competitive opposition and the sense of being superior: interpreting the *mhadhara* through the lens of 'atmosphere'

When understanding aesthetics not as a theory of art, but as a theory of sensory knowledge (Böhme 2001, 29; Meyer 2009, 6), one can get an interesting angle on what is happening during *mihadhara*. Building upon the work of the

German philosopher Hermann Schmitz, Gernot Böhme (2001, 48) uses the idea of 'atmosphere' to talk about emotions that are not subjective, not bound to an individual, but spread out in space, and grip everybody who is present in a certain situation. Schmitz uses the situation of a funeral service as an example. Even if an intruder does not know exactly what is going on, s/he can feel the sadness which fills the space, as "the radiance of the atmosphere is particularly impressive in the case of grief" (Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby 2011, 258). Atmospheres are therefore quasi-objective and it is possible to sense the emotions that "exist in public space, not in an individual's mind" (ibid, 246) in a given situation. It is, however, also possible to create certain atmospheres, as it is done, for instance, by people working in aesthetic professions, such as design or marketing. Such professionals know how to arrange things in a way that creates a certain affect in the observer (Böhme 2001, 53). Friedlind Riedel further argues that atmospheres have a homogenising effect, which results in situations in which "a group of bodies comes to exist as a felt collective" (Riedel 2019, 85) and "even discordant voices and bodies are fashioned in an all-encompassing style" (ibid, 90).

It can be argued that something similar takes place during a *mhadhara* and also during narrations of conversions to Islam. As described, an atmosphere of competition and a sense of superiority emanates during these meetings. This atmosphere is re-enacted during the talk about the Bible–Qur'an comparison and its importance for conversions to Islam in other circumstances. These narratives are, for instance, re-told by religious leaders, Muslim congregations, families, and friends and are part of material published for proselytising. Even Muslim missionary groups that are more active within Islamic communities regard the successful conversion of a Christian as a special success. Ahmed speaks of a re-enactment or narrativity of conversion:

> Conversion publicity has become a tradition. After the collective prayer in the main mosque in Nairobi (Jama'at Mosque), the imam often announces over the microphone the name of a person who has just converted to Islam. [...] They [Muslims] enjoy the conversions that take place during the *mihadhara* and like to listen to the stories new converts relate and the confessions they make—edifying tales on how they found the right path toward Islam. (Ahmed 2008, 11)

Both enactments of the atmosphere of intellectual superiority are linked by being part of an "aesthetic style" (Meyer 2009, 9–10). Birgit Meyer (2004) builds her own theory on James Ferguson's "cultural style" which emphasises the performative competences of "practices that signify differences between social categories" (Ferguson 1999, 95). Meyer (2004) develops this concept further by looking at the importance of style in the construction and maintenance of religious formations. Understood as a "forming form" (Meyer 2009, 11), as mediating between content and form (Meyer 2004, 95), specific 'aesthetic styles' adopted by various religious communities can be

distinguished. Unlike the 'pentecostalite' style Meyer (2004) describes, in the case of the *mihadhara*, it is not good and evil that feature as two opposing forces, but it is the realm of Christianity and the realm of Islam that are pitted against each other in competition. Similar to the pentecostalite style Meyer depicts, form and content play a role across various groups and movements: this approach is used in different ways and in different media, but the features of comparing the internal logics of the holy texts and the knowledge of the religious believers appear in a very similar way. When looking at the Bible–Qur'an comparison which is omnipresent in the Muslim discourse in East Africa, it can therefore be argued that it has become an established practice of competitive opposition, which creates an atmosphere of superiority.

Conclusion

To look at *mhadhara* in this way elucidates two different aspects. On the one hand, what is displayed is a competition in which one can be more successful than the other, not a conflict which is either won or lost. On the other hand, it gives the group organising the meeting the possibility to feel superior to the other and hence strengthen its self-confidence and unity.

Despite the strong polemics that mark the competition between the various religious movements and in particular between Christianity and Islam in Kenya, there has been no widespread violence between Christians and Muslims, in contrast to episodes of violent attacks on grounds of ethnic categorisation, even when the various terrorist attacks are taken into account, perpetrated by, partly non-Kenyan, Muslims since the 1990s (Oded 2000, 102; Wesonga 2017, 225).

As the history of the *mihadhara* shows, the developments in the Muslim communities in Tanzania and Kenya are closely interlinked—the religious congregations stay in regular cross-border exchange with each other, with both countries having seen rising tensions between Christians and Muslims since the 1980s, at the very time when missionary work from both sides has increased. Both countries also underwent similar economic and political changes in the 1990s.

Concerning Tanzania, which has a higher share (about 30%) of the Muslim population than Kenya, Roman Loimeier argued that it was on the brink of becoming a country where "conflicts easily acquire religious connotations" (Loimeier 2007, 137–138). At the same time he remarked that the political realm had control over the religious one, in contrast to Nigeria, and that there was a "general desire to reach a consensus" in Tanzanian politics (ibid, 152). This resonates with Paul Kaiser's (2001) reasoning that, although the political and economic liberalisation in the early 1990s resulted in competition over scarce resources and the strengthening of sub-national

group identifications in Tanzania, for instance, on a religious level, this development was counter-balanced by a political discourse of multiculturalism.

In the case of Kenya, the competitive element in politics has been even stronger than in Tanzania, even though ethnic categorisations have played a more important role in this realm than religious identifications (Haugerud 1995, 38–44). However, the two areas with a Muslim majority population, the coast and the north-eastern part of the country, feel marginalised by the central Kenyan government, which is regarded to be dominated by Christians (although Muslim are increasingly well represented in the centre of power).

Despite its prevalence in the public sphere, religion has played a relatively minor role in political debates, with two exceptions: the discussion about the new Constitution in the late 2000s and the debate about the future of the coast in the early 2010s. In regard to the new Constitution, which was demanded by both Christians and Muslims, the discussion about the refined status of *kadhi* courts (they apply Muslim law to personal matters, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance) served as a re-negotiation of the role of religion in the state in general (Mwangi 2012) and the position of Muslims vis-à-vis the state in particular (Tayob 2013). Concerning the future of the coast, neither in the expression *pwani si Kenya* ('the coast is not Kenya') used by the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) nor in wider public discussions, religion was used as a central argument (Willis and Gona 2013; Deacon et al. 2017).

The relative absence of religion from the sphere of political conflict is a matter not only of history, but also of competition on a symbolic level. Abdulkader Tayob (2013) shows that, in the 1990s and 2000s, a political realignment of Muslims by the state took place as well as a competition of religious communities over symbolic dominance in the public sphere. I argue that the institution of *mhadhara* plays an important role in this regard, as it enables Muslims to enact the competition or rivalry on a symbolic level. To follow this argument strengthens the impression that what takes place is a ritualised competition, not a conflict. It is not the destruction of the other group that stays in the foreground of the debates, but the proof of one's own strength.

The logic of a ritualised symbolic competition, which puts one's own group into the position of superiority and hence heightening its status, also makes sense in the light of the Muslim perception of marginalisation. The idea of having a realm where one's group is stronger than other groups of society, who are considered richer and more powerful, can create a comfort zone.

The rumours that converts to Islam during these meetings are actually Muslims pretending to undergo conversion can be seen as another indicator that what goes on is not so much an open discussion as a staged performance. The question is: a performance for whom? Besides public discussion and sermons (and healing sessions in the case of Pentecostal

churches), conversions and narratives about conversion play an important role at the symbolic level of religious competition. By functioning as part of an aesthetic style, the impressions created through the events are effective in a much wider field and are taken up when conversion is talked about, re-enacting an atmosphere of intellectual superiority felt during the *mihadhara*.

That most attendees of these events are not Christians, to whom these discussions are overtly addressed, but Muslims, fits into this picture. Missionary activity is ultimately not the most important result or focus of these discussions. It is rather a public display of religiosity, knowledge, and the strength of Islam and the community of Muslims. Likewise, conversion narratives are used as a sign of strength, compensating for a sense of economic and political marginalisation.

Furthermore, the sense of superiority can create a perception of unity among Muslims. Something which at first sight seems a method of missionary work among Christians therefore also serves as a unifying element among East African Muslims, who are highly divided in ethnic terms as well as on the question of what it means to be a 'good Muslim'. This holds true even if the activists who are driving this movement are mainly up-country Muslims and are criticised by some of the (former) Muslim élite. However, the way the Bible–Qur'an comparison is used by many Muslims shows that the sense of being superior is sometimes more important than differences between the diverse Islamic missionary movements.

Notes

1. The interviews were carried out in Kiswahili and English, and where possible, recorded and transcribed. All the names of interviewees used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. He did not make clear, however, whether he sees it as an additional pillar or as substituting one of the other five pillars (the *shahadah*, the five daily ritual prayers, fasting during Ramadan, alms giving, the *hajj*).
3. In Kenya, preachers of the *Tablighi Jama'at* which, according to its own standards, focuses its missionary endeavours on Muslims, also target Christians.
4. The census data published by the Kenyan state are not always consistent and vary between different sources.
5. Three other narratives can be distinguished: 1) conversion as a gradual 'new social orientation' without making a complete break with the past; 2) conversion as a 'moral stabilisation', found by following certain rules, which results not only in a change of *habitus*, but also in a newly found inner strength (both narratives were mainly used by women); 3) conversion as 'political opposition' (to 'the West' as well as to the local governments), narrated only by men who had changed their entire social networks after converting to Islam (Scharrer 2013, 209–347).
6. Many Muslims consider the 'Gospel of Barnabas', depicting Jesus in a way which is close to an Islamic reading, as an apocryphal text (Leirvik 2002). The earliest known manuscript, however, dates back to the sixteenth century (Joosten 2010, 200).
7. This argument is based on works such as that by Bucaille (1976).

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