

RESEARCH ARTICLE

White-adjacent Muslim development: racializing British Muslim aid in Mali

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Abstract

Muslim aid organizations are relatively new actors in the Western aid industry. Based on multi-sited ethnographic research with the UK-based NGO Islamic Relief, I explore the organization's engagement with a school in need of repair in southern rural Mali that is also the site of a sacred shrine of importance to locals. I examine the contextual global logics of racialization that undergird different interpretations and practices of what it means to 'do good'. Situating an understanding of 'development' in an analysis of global racial capitalism, I argue that, as an Islamically inspired aid organization based in the UK, Islamic Relief is both subject to anti-Muslim racism *and* complicit in a white-adjacent racialized project of 'development' in Africa. I foreground the whiteness of development to show how modernist development practice makes it impossible to see other ways of conceptualizing 'doing good' that are also deeply grounded in Islam.

Résumé

Les organisations d'aide musulmanes sont des acteurs relativement nouveaux dans le secteur de l'aide occidentale. Se basant sur des études ethnographiques multisites menées avec l'ONG britannique Islamic Relief, l'auteur explore l'engagement de l'organisation auprès d'une école pour l'aider à réparer ses bâtiments dans une région rurale du Sud du Mali qui est aussi le site d'un sanctuaire d'importance pour la population locale. Il examine la logique globale contextuelle de racialisation qui sous-tend différentes interprétations et pratiques de ce que signifie « faire le bien ». Situait une compréhension du « développement » dans une analyse du capitalisme racial mondial, l'auteur soutient qu'en tant qu'organisation d'aide d'inspiration islamique basée au Royaume-Uni, Islamic Relief est à la fois l'objet de racisme anti-musulmans *et* complice dans un projet racialisé blanc adjacent de « développement » en Afrique. Il met en avant la blancheur du développement pour montrer comment la pratique moderniste du développement permet de voir d'autres façons de conceptualiser le « faire le bien » qui sont également profondément ancrées dans l'islam.

Resumo

As organizações de ajuda muçulmana são actores relativamente novos na indústria de ajuda ocidental. Com base na investigação etnográfica multi-situada com a ONG britânica Islamic Relief, exploro o envolvimento da organização com uma escola que necessita de reparação no

sul rural do Mali, que é também o local de um santuário sagrado de importância para os habitantes locais. Examinando lógicas contextuais globais de racialização que sustentam diferentes interpretações e práticas do que significa ‘fazer o bem’. Situando o entendimento de ‘desenvolvimento’ numa análise do capitalismo racial global, defendo que, como uma organização de ajuda de inspiração islâmica sediada no Reino Unido, a Islamic Relief está simultaneamente sujeita ao racismo antimuçulmano e cúmplice de um projecto de ‘desenvolvimento’ racializado de adição branca em África. Eu ponho em evidência a branquidade do desenvolvimento para mostrar como a prática modernista do desenvolvimento torna impossível ver outras formas de conceptualizar ‘fazer o bem’ que também estão profundamente enraizadas no Islão.

We had been bouncing along dirt roads in the back of a white minibus for hours. Joining a group of UK-based Islamic Relief fundraisers in March 2012 as they visited the organization’s development project sites throughout Mali – to collect ‘real stories of real need’ – it was our second day in Ouléssébougou, a rural commune approximately eighty kilometres south of Bamako. Our first visit of the day was a school with a ‘real need’ – this was how the group of Muslim young men, most of whom were of Pakistani descent from cities across northern England, described the people and places we visited in Mali. On the bus, one of the fundraisers clarified to me that charity work was not just a job for them; it was their way of life. He excitedly showed me their group’s posts on social media and explained how friends back home were following their trip and liking content as they uploaded it.¹

When we arrived at the site, villagers explained to fundraisers that the school, which had been built eight years earlier, was in need of repairs following a fire. The fire had destroyed the school master’s office – there was not even a table for him to put his books on. In the dry season the well on site would dry up and students and teachers had to travel for water, requiring children to walk long distances to use a bathroom. However, in addition to the physical repairs to the school, local community members pointed out that this village, Djanikoro, was also the site of a renowned shrine in honour of the Muslim saint of geomancy, Djitoumou Moussa. They explained that the shrine was significant as a place of pilgrimage, noting that every year thousands came from all over the world to pay homage and make supplications to the saint. The local population told the fundraisers that it was shameful for them that outsiders who came to the village saw their desperate situation.

After the formal presentation, the fundraisers scattered to take pictures and short videos with villagers, documenting ‘real people with real need’ to use for promotional fundraising materials. Without asking or following up about the shrine, fundraisers engaged with the site as a place to fundraise to rebuild the school. Given my interest in the multiplicity of Islamic practices within transnational Muslim aid encounters, I asked local staff for more information about the shrine. Amadou, a staff member based in the Bamako office, frowned and said that the shrine was a bad thing. ‘It

¹ I elaborate on this encounter in an examination of Islamic Relief’s practices of *zakat* (Rahman 2017). In that account I emphasize the cultivation of a distinct ethical sensibility by interacting with beneficiaries with dignity, so as to distinguish it from an ethics of pity, exemplified in Christian notions of charity.

is like idol worship,' he said. Hearing us converse, an Islamic Relief intern based in the rural office in Ouléssébougou, Fatimah, joined in; she and Amadou got into a heated discussion. Amadou seemed upset, as was Fatimah, and then a few more people joined the discussion. Later, away from Amadou, Fatimah defended the shrine by explaining:

Djitoumou Moussa is a saint and he can do things for people. You go to him and ask for something, like to get married or have a baby. If it comes true, whatever you promised to the saint, you have to go back and give it to him. If you don't, something bad will happen.

As I develop further below, for Fatimah and other villagers with whom I interacted later, making supplications and offerings to the saint, or engaging in practices of geomancy – practices associated with esoteric forms of knowledge (Brenner 2001) – were commonplace and irrefutably a part of their practice and identity as Muslims.

In the van again, after the visit to the school, Amadou expressed to me that many villagers say that they are Muslim but they have idols too, or they say that they pray but they don't know how, or some pray twice a day, unaware that they are supposed to pray five times. He told me that it was his dream to one day have his own NGO – one as professional and impressive as Islamic Relief – that would teach rural people in Mali about Islam.

When I was able to return to the village years later, people explained to me the significance of the shrine and their appreciation for the things the saint did for them. Whereas those living in Djanikoro relayed the importance of the shrine in navigating their daily life, some staff members from the office in Bamako warned of the dangers and inappropriateness of what they considered non-Islamic practices associated with the shrine. I gesture to this debate to assert that negotiations over correct Muslim practice take place within a broader context of global logics of racialization.

In this article I explore the multiple meanings and enactments of 'doing good' in relation to Islamic Relief's involvement with this site of humanitarian intervention. I use this example to illuminate the multiple ways in which those gathered at the burned-down school, in a village that is home to a renowned, religiously significant shrine, engaged with that shrine. For Fatimah and other locals in Djanikoro, the shrine was unquestionably pivotal to their daily existence and well-being. For Amadou and other staff members from Bamako, the shrine and associated practices were a corruption of 'authentic' Islam that Muslims needed to be educated out of. Lastly, for the fundraisers, the shrine and its relevance to the villagers were invisible – for them, the village was significant exclusively as the site of a school that needed to be rebuilt. I consider these engagements with the shrine as indicative of the multiple ways in which Muslims enact 'doing good', which are best understood as localized instantiations of global logics of racialization. Islamic Relief celebrates a common religious understanding with Muslim communities around the world. Yet what keeps fundraisers from being able to see local Muslim practices such as those associated with the shrine as Islamic is an effect of the ways in which the whiteness of development prescribes what entails 'development'. Racial legacies of colonial ways of 'knowing' Islam in West Africa, which distinguished 'authentic' Islam from 'African' Islam, were what conditioned whether one disregarded or contested local Muslim practices associated with the shrine.

I contrast the limits of development discourse and ideology with a broader conception of development that appreciates the divergent ways in which people enact and envision being a 'good Muslim' and endeavour to achieve a better future. Unlike (re)building a school, getting married and having children are not 'achievable deliverables' according to a development logic, yet these were crucial achievements for some local Muslims' own striving for a good life and a better future. I argue that, despite the shrine's and the saint's importance to villagers' own conceptions and practices for making better futures, officially Islamic Relief's enactment of 'good Muslimness' is constrained by what I elaborate below as the normative whiteness of development. Understanding white supremacy as a global political system (Mills 2016) entails a conception of whiteness that extends beyond power solely connected to or held by white people over non-white people. Recognizing that 'modernity is racial' entails a conceptualization of race that extends beyond the body (Hesse 2007).² Christian has used the term 'deep and malleable whiteness' to conceptualize contemporary global white supremacy, noting that 'deep and malleable whiteness is produced through the extension of white economic, political, and cultural power and the attempt of [non-white] countries and groups to negotiate their racial structure and discursive positions by developing forms of racial capital as an avenue to whiten' (Christian 2019: 170). This conceptualization of white supremacy as a political system is essential to understanding the role of 'development' in maintaining global material inequality through the perpetuation of global racial capitalism.

Between 2009 and 2019, I conducted multi-sited ethnographic research with the international development and humanitarian NGO Islamic Relief. I spent time as a researcher and informal volunteer in offices and project field sites in the UK, the USA, Mali, Chad, Niger, the Netherlands and South Africa. Conducting ethnographic research in fundraising and administrative offices in the USA and Europe, and in field sites in West and South Africa while also attending to transnational relations within each site illuminated contradictory and multiple meanings and material enactments of what it meant to 'do good'. My focus on Islamic development and humanitarianism practice draws from an ethnographically informed, practice-based and actor-network theory methodological approach that shifts the question from 'if' development works to 'how' it works (Mosse 2005). This methodological turn in anthropological studies of development reveals that 'development' is not entirely predetermined and shows how actors on the ground disrupt and shift development in practice. Yet, a focus on what Islamic Relief *does* counterintuitively brought to light that which the organization did not, or could not, do. I claim that, at an official level, as represented in the account above by the UK-based fundraisers, historically significant Muslim

² In the development of an analytics that he describes as racialized modernity, Barnor Hesse advances a conceptualization of race that extends beyond the body, understanding race as a foundationally relational category, born out of colonial classifications of Europeaness versus non-Europeaness. He writes:

In my view what race/modernity studies have so far neglected, conceptually if not historically, is the formative signifier of Europeaness, as a defining logic of race in the process of colonially constituting itself and its designations of non-Europeaness, materially, discursively and extracorporeally . . . the classifications and taxonomies of race, though apparently framed as physical entities, are profoundly implicated in relationality. These normalized race relations were actually constituted through the colonial designations of Europeaness and non-Europeaness, in various assemblages of social, economic, ecological, historical and corporeal life. (Hesse 2007: 646)

practices in the region, such as those associated with the shrine, were invisible and illegible. Despite their claims of adapting to local contexts wherever they work, the fact that they did not 'see' the shrine – or the importance of esoteric practices to local Muslims – at the official 'global' level means that Islamic Relief is limited in its capacity to relate to the different ways in which West African Muslims imagine and strive to enact a good life and a better future.

Building on ethnographic accounts of the various ways in which Islamic Relief relates to the site of the school/shrine, I propose that the institutional constraints surrounding what 'doing good' as a Muslim development organization can entail are conditioned by global logics of racialization. These logics of racialization undergird the material conditions within which Islamic Relief operates. I situate Islamic Relief's development and humanitarian aid in Mali in terms of logics of racialization to illuminate how 'development' normalizes the exploitative appropriation and extraction of labour and resources from Africa that are associated with global racial capitalism.

While visiting development projects in Mali with the British fundraisers, some of the young men explained to me that the founder of Islamic Relief – affectionally referred to as Dr Hany – often told them that it was their job to work towards a world that no longer needed them to fundraise and advocate for international aid. Yet, after over sixty years, 'development' has not upended racialized global material inequality. Foregrounding logics of racialization, histories of colonialism and geographies of racial capitalism, I argue that, although Islamic Relief is a Muslim development and humanitarian organization that seeks to adapt to Muslim contexts wherever it works, its position as a Western-based development organization restricts its official aid initiatives to what I claim is white-adjacent development.³ By using the term 'white-adjacent', I seek to flag the double bind affecting Islamic Relief as both subject to and complicit in global white supremacy. Situating Islamic Relief practices within a broader context of global white supremacy and racial capitalism, I highlight Islamic Relief's limited ability to challenge Western conceptions and practices of development and instead consider how Islamically based aid participates in a perpetuation of Western hegemony through other means.

Yet, attending to global white supremacy also requires addressing anti-Muslim racism. As a UK-based Islamically inspired development NGO, Islamic Relief is subject to anti-Muslim racism (Kundnani 2007). Simultaneously, working in Africa as a Western-based development NGO entails taking on a development logic that is complicit in white supremacy and the maintenance of racial capitalism. To maintain this contradiction – as a global organization, Islamic Relief is both subject to and complicit in white supremacist logics of global racialization – I describe Islamic Relief's development practice in Mali as white-adjacent development. I suggest that it is the normative whiteness of development that restrains the fundraisers' ability to see local Malian Muslims' own aspirations and practices for making a better future.

³ In an examination of Islamic Relief's practices in South Africa (Rahman 2021), I explore how racist institutional obligations compelled Islamic Relief to take particular 'moderate' stances on gender and sexuality with regard to HIV and AIDS programming. I contrast official practices at an institutional level with what I suggest is a humanitarianism of a different kind enacted through self-determined strategies promoted by Black South African Muslim activists within the organization.

In this article, I argue that Islamic Relief's 'official' engagement in Mali and with local conditions – including what it means to be a good Muslim and to work towards a better future – is constrained by the white supremacist ideological underpinnings of international development and humanitarianism. Using the example of the UK fundraisers' visit to the school, I suggest that, while non-white British Muslim fundraisers participate in the whiteness of humanitarianism and development, back in the UK these same fundraisers and volunteers are racialized as potential threats to the British nation state. Global logics of racialization provide crucial context to understand that, for these young Muslim men, mostly of Pakistani descent and living in the post-industrial cities of northern England, 'doing good' development work in Africa became a way to prove the humanity that anti-Muslim racism deprives them of in the UK. To associate Islamic Relief with white adjacency is not to incriminate these young men – or even the organization. Rather, I do so to emphasize that, within conditions of global white supremacy and racial capitalism, 'doing good' is implicated in upholding those conditions. Regardless of Islamic Relief's Muslim identity, and despite the anti-Muslim racism the organization is subjected to, the extent to which it joins in the liberal project of Western development in Africa means that it upholds rather than disrupts a project of white saviourism (Cole 2012). This has significant implications, given that, as a Muslim organization, it is a site that offers an implicit understanding of what being a 'good' Muslim could mean and what should or should not be considered authentic Islam. Where villagers see a sacred shrine (and a damaged school), Islamic Relief as a development institution sees only a school that requires repairs.

To situate Islamic Relief fundraisers' 'not seeing' the shrine, despite its significance in the daily existence of villagers whom they were 'helping', I first highlight the epistemic and material processes of development in Africa as undergirded by a logic of white supremacy and as complicit in the maintenance of racial capitalism. Next, given Islamic Relief's unique impact on the Western aid industry as an Islamically guided development and humanitarian institution, I survey the significance of Islamic Relief and Muslim aid organizations more broadly as new actors within the industry and consider the implications of their racialized position within the context of global anti-Muslim racism. Finally, building on this foundational claim of development as constrained within a logic of global white supremacy, I situate Islamic Relief fundraisers' inability to 'see' the shrine and the related esoteric practices that were significant to West African Muslims within the Western anthropological and historical study of Islamic practice in West Africa. I focus on the epistemological legacy that constructs a racialized divide between North and 'sub-Saharan' Africa, relegating the study and acceptance of authentic Islam to the former, and anthropological studies of Black African animism to the latter (Trimingham 1962; Launay 2006; Saul 2006; Soares 2014; Ware 2014; Young and Weitzberg 2022). I do so to argue that the invisibility of the shrine to UK fundraisers is racially significant. I conclude by contextualizing the position of British Muslim aid workers to illuminate how global white supremacy offers inclusion through assimilation. I propose that, for Muslims who are subject to anti-Muslim racism in the UK, international aid work offers a means to prove a humanity that is otherwise in question.

The whiteness of development: racial capitalism and Africa in the global economy

In every rural area I visited with Islamic Relief in Mali, Niger and Chad, roadsides were lined with small white signs with the familiar insignias of agencies such as UNICEF, World Vision and the International Committee of the Red Cross. In the account referred to above, when we arrived in the village of Djanikoro, we were greeted with a grandiose fanfare of drumming, dancing and singing. I was overwhelmed the first time I witnessed this reception, which ended up taking place in nearly every village we visited, and I asked Amadou, the Malian staff member who was suspicious of the shrine, what he made of the celebration. He told me that it reminded him of his youth; when foreigners came it was always a big deal – it was a big party and all the children were excited and happy.

Development – used here to refer to the epistemological and material processes and practices associated with the post-World War Two Western-based enterprise to bring about economic, cultural and political ‘modernization’ to the formerly colonized world – was ubiquitous in my encounters in rural West Africa. Writer Teju Cole has referred to the Western development and humanitarian aid industry as the white-saviour industrial complex (2012). Situating the history of development in an analysis of racial capitalism, in this section I maintain that the signs of development are not simply associated with ‘foreigners’, as Amadou notes of the ceremonial visits of staff and fundraisers from development NGOs to rural villages, but with whiteness.

In one of my first field visits to an Islamic Relief office on the East Coast of the USA, a staff member said to me that Islamic Relief is like a white tissue, adapting and moulding to the way in which Islam is practised in the various places it works: ‘In Afghanistan we are Hanafi, in Malaysia we are Shafi’ – referring to the different Islamic schools or jurisprudence followed around the world. However, there are racially motivated institutional limits to the kinds of Islamic practices Islamic Relief can officially engage in, adopt or condone. As many staff members explained to me in various offices, although Islamic Relief is Islamically inspired, given its official stance that it does not discriminate according to race, religion or gender, the organization could not, for example, use funds to build a mosque. The restrictions involved with being funded and located in the UK meant having to skirt boundaries between the religious and the secular. I foreground the whiteness of development to show how modernist development practice makes it impossible to see other ways of conceptualizing ‘doing good’ that are also deeply grounded in Islam. ‘Seeing’ like a modern development NGO makes certain practices and ethical orientations visible, and others invisible.

I turn now to an analysis of the origins and evolution of the concept of development in Africa as complicit in white supremacy and racial capitalism. The emergence of the concept of development is often attributed to a speech in 1949 by US President Truman, when he referred to his ‘bold new programme for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas’ (Gardner and Lewis 1996). After World War Two, development became the new conceptual framework for theorizing relations between the ‘West’ and its former colonies (Cooper and Packard 1998: 1). Given the rise of independence movements in former colonies calling for decolonization and

self-determination, and changes in the global economy that required new extractive procedures between colonizer and colonized, relations between the West and the rest were no longer framed in terms of a European civilizing mission; rather, they were designated in terms of modernization and development (*ibid.*: 1; Lushaba 2009: 22; Decker and McMahon 2020: 4).

The move from civilizing to 'modernizing' entailed a different ideological justification for Western intervention in the colonized world. Theories of modernization assumed a theological mode of history in which the 'West' – associated with order, logic and reason – had already developed as modern, and the rest of the world, caught in the grip of 'tradition', needed to 'catch up'. The non-West was conceptualized as either a corrupt civilization in permanent decline, or, as in the case of Africa, as outside history altogether. The presumed responsibility for Third World dependency could now be deflected to Third World 'traditional cultural values' (Power 2018: 1). However, Black Marxist scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Walter Rodney have argued that the processes that brought modernization to the West were created through the exploitation of land and labour in the rest of the world (Du Bois 1965; Rodney 2018). Operating with a conceptualization of racial capitalism, these authors foreground that race and class were never competing categories; instead, they recognize that class is and has always been racialized.

Theorists of racial capitalism illuminate how histories of enslavement and colonization undergird capitalist formations and demonstrate race-making as central to the global political economy (Du Bois 1965; Williams 1994; Robinson 2000; Kelley 2003).⁴ Yet 'development' as a Western project of modernization conceptualizes relative African poverty as the result of presumed African inferiority, and not due to global processes of racial capitalist exploitation. Attention to racialization therefore situates 'development', broadly conceived, as a project of white supremacy as it enforces and maintains global relations of racialized exploitation (Wilson 2012; Pierre 2020; Phiri 2020).

In the 1990s, when deregulatory adjustment, privatization and economic models emphasizing the free markets and trade refocused the global political economy towards neoliberal globalization, development discourse shifted accordingly and embraced theories of 'participatory development' and 'empowerment'. Just as the discourse of colonialism's 'civilizing mission' shifted when national liberation movements in Africa and Asia called for self-determination, so too did critiques of the Orientalist logic motivating 'modernization' prompt the discourse of the Western development industry to shift again, this time towards the language of 'empowering' the global South to develop themselves (Sharma 2008; Wilson 2011: 323). Whereas modernization theory placed the blame for un-development on the so-called traditional cultures and values of the non-West, neoliberal development's embrace of empowerment claimed to recognize the value of traditional cultures and values but asserted that people of the global South simply needed support from the developed parts of the world to be able to 'empower' themselves.

⁴ As Danewid summarizes, 'race-making practices are intrinsic to processes of capital accumulation because racism supplies the precarious and exploitable lives that capitalism needs to extract land and labor' (2020: 298).

Just as scholars attentive to racial capitalism highlight the racialized nature of exploitation justified by theories of modernization, so too have scholars uncovered the racial underpinnings of the ways in which African politics are often described (Pierre 2020: 90). In her analysis of what she terms the racial vernaculars of development, Jemima Pierre argues that, in reference to development in Africa, normalized concepts within the development industry such as good governance and capacity building are built on racialized constructions of essential African racial difference and Western white supremacy. Her analysis points to the relation between race, language and the unequal material conditions of racial capitalism.⁵ Despite claims of improving living conditions in the ‘developing’ world, international development NGOs do not ‘change the prevailing power relations that place African states at the bottom of the global economic order and its populations at the bottom of the global division of labor’ (*ibid.*: 92). Despite the shifts in language (from civilizing to modernizing to empowering) and specific economic arrangements and relations of power (direct colonization, neo-colonialism, neoliberalism), in over half a century of ‘development’, the exploitative extraction of labour and material resources from the global South by the global North has persisted. This is due to the consistency of the global logic of white supremacy.

Whereas recently scholars have made significant contributions to foreground race and whiteness in their analysis of development (White 2002; Goudge 2003; Kothari 2006), as Wilson notes, these works focus more on the discursive implications of racialization at the expense of analyses that emphasize the material conditions of racialized resource extraction that ‘have been both reproduced and changed in successive eras’ (Wilson 2012: 211). Islamic Relief is engaged in white-adjacent development in the dual sense suggested by Wilson: simultaneously deploying ideologies of ‘relief’ originating in the West and implicitly reproducing the dynamics of resource extraction and accumulation through which the West continues to dominate the global economy – that is, through which Western-based development organizations continue to be able to ‘give aid’ to the ‘developing’ world.

Islamic aid, anti-Muslim racism and the global War on Terror

Founded in Birmingham, England, in 1984, Islamic Relief has become the world’s largest and most-recognized Western-based Islamic aid organization. While this kind of international, institutionalized ‘doing good’ takes both religious and secular forms, Islamic precursors include the International Islamic Relief Organization, founded in 1979 in Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic African Relief Agency, established in 1981 in Sudan. A few years later, several similar organizations were founded by Muslim immigrants living in Britain. Whereas African and Middle Eastern Islamic organizations are often theorized as trying to counter the influence of Western aid in Africa (Soares and Otayek 2007: 50), Western Islamic NGOs – such as Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid – which identify simultaneously as Western and Islamic, must negotiate

⁵ Pierre argues that the racial vernacular of development serves to ‘not only structure the unequal and racialized relationship between Africa and the West but also to obscure the role of colonialism (and post-colonial hierarchies) in producing global inequalities while rendering the structural and epistemological violence of the development industry routine and commonsense’ (Pierre 2020: 88).

a supposed contradiction between Western and Islamic values. Recounting the early days of the organization in an online interview, Islamic Relief founder Dr Hany el-Banna described the difficulties of gaining credibility, 'particularly if you call yourself Islamic in the heart of the Christian civilized western world. [We had to ask] How can the West accept you and the Muslim not suspect you?'⁶ It is in the necessity for acceptance in the Western aid world that I make the claim for understanding Islamic Relief's development initiatives as white-adjacent.

Early scholarship on Islamic aid questioned whether or not 'universal' humanitarian⁷ principles, in particular that of impartiality, were compatible with Islam (Hashmi 1993; Benthall 2003b; Ghandour 2003; Bellion-Jourdan 2007; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009). A number of scholars examining Islamic NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa have sounded the alarm regarding the ideological influence and geopolitical implications of an increased presence of Islamic NGOs from the Arab world in Africa (Salih 2002; Ahmed 2009; Weiss 2007; Kaag 2016). In contrast, anthropologist Benthall analyses Islamic concepts such as *zakat*, *sadaqa* and *waqf* to show that, despite a distinct 'cultural' significance, they have an ethical equivalence with Western concepts such as charitable giving and generosity (Benthall 1999; 2003b; 2012). Having also conducted research with Islamic Relief in Mali, Benthall notes that the organization's 'highly practical way of interpreting and articulating these Islamic values, analogous to that of Britain's Christian Aid, seems well in tune both with Mali's religious traditions and with official economic and humanitarian priorities (Benthall 2006: 20). However, my own research revealed a limited capacity to engage with the diversity of Malian Muslim traditions. In the wake of the global War on Terror's effects on aid flows to Islamic associations worldwide, Benthall reinforces the good Muslim/bad Muslim double bind, acclaiming the potential of those he deems 'liberally inclined Muslims' to combat the intellectual dangers of 'Wahhabism and similar schools that attempt to curb interpretation' (Benthall 2003a).

When on the one hand scholars have condemned Islamic aid in Africa as complicit in the Arabization of Islam, and on the other they have celebrated the potential for 'moderate' Muslim aid organizations to counter supposedly extremist political Muslim factions in the Muslim world, these positions take up international Muslim aid as either 'good' or 'bad'. As Mamdani claims in a now ubiquitously cited argument, post-Cold War American imperialist policy initiated a global binary distinction between good and bad Muslims (Mamdani 2004). Given the omnipresent reach of this binary as manifest in an ongoing Western global War on Terror, Islamic Relief's operation as an Islamically founded NGO in the West is subject to anti-Muslim racism; as Dr Hany affirmed in the interview, to make sure that the West accepts you, you must prove that you are 'good' Muslims.

The 'good' Muslim is liberal, 'modern', democratic and, following Asad's genealogies of the categories of religion and secularism, effectively secular (Asad 2003). To maintain its acceptance within the Western aid industry, Islamic Relief must officially

⁶ 'Starting Islamic Relief: an interview. Dr Hany El Banna with Gavin produced for SIFE', YouTube, 2016 <<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8CncQSEaZXNM-kzKhVJt51PULONFAfPx>>.

⁷ Whereas humanitarianism is often distinguished from development, for Islamic Relief this distinction is not pertinent. To uncover how Islamic Relief is subject to anti-Muslim racism within the aid industry, I examine Islamic humanitarianism as an aspect of Islamic development.

position itself as ‘modern’ and, while ‘Islamically inspired’, effectively secular. I understand Islamic Relief’s official non-engagement with the shrine as an effect of the anti-Muslim racism that requires Muslims who wish to be accepted in the West to practise an effectively secular, ‘modern’ Islam. Hence, officially Islamic Relief can support the villagers of Djanikoro only by rebuilding a school, and it must distance itself from supposedly ‘backward’ animist corruptions of authentic Islamic practices represented by the shrine. I maintain that this racialized dichotomy between good and bad Muslim is negotiated by Islamic Relief by asserting its white adjacency. I now consider the effects of this racialized compulsion to be ‘good Muslims’ in an analysis of the significance of the shrine to the villagers of Djanikoro.

Invisible Muslims? Djitoumou Moussa, geomancy and Islam in West Africa

On the fiftieth anniversary of Malian independence in 2010, Malian playwright, educator and activist Gaoussou Diawara wrote:

In the village of Djanikoro, an invisible force holds you back. It hangs over houses, paths, objects, smells, sounds, atmosphere, a force tinged with chastity and holiness. It is the village that made the Holy See of the Bambara universe. He [a visitor to the village] wants to open himself to the world as the cradle of the rituals devoted to Djitoumou Moussa, also called Balla Sabali ani Balla Kunubali, the Holy of Holies. (Diawara 2010)

In this section I explore local meanings and the relevance of the shrine to villagers’ everyday lives (and their visions for a ‘better’ future) to consider the limits of Muslim solidarity in a Muslim development NGO’s inability to ‘see’ certain forms of local Muslim practice. I consider the importance of what has been named esoteric (Brenner 2001), embodied (Ware 2014) or ‘maraboutage’ (Mommersteeg 2011) – forms of Islamic knowing that have not only ‘made a major contribution to the development of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa’ (Kane 2012: 29) but which continue to be central to many West African Muslims’ sense of ‘well-being’ (Mommersteeg 1999). The fundraisers’ inability to ‘see’ the shrine and related local practices presents a failure to see historically West African ways of knowing Islam, being Muslim, and engaging with the future.

I returned to Mali – and to the village of Djanikoro – in 2019 to learn more about the shrine. Villagers explained to me that Djitoumou Moussa was a traditional Islamic healer who had sacred knowledge of the medicinal properties of local plants, and whose status as a saint was affirmed by the mysterious end to his life. People repeated the Bamanan phrase *Bala Sabali Bala Kunubali*, meaning ‘He is not dead, he is not alive.’ Historian Facoh Donki Diarra (2001) describes Djitoumou Moussa as the person responsible for bringing to and popularizing in Mali the esoteric practice of geomancy. The term geomancy is translated as ‘foresight by earth’, which is itself a translation of the Arabic term *‘ilm al-raml*, or ‘the science of sand’.

Historian Louis Brenner notes that divination has been practised throughout the Muslim world for at least seven centuries and was present in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies in the Mediterranean and Asia long before any documented evidence of its presence in sub-Saharan Africa. Given contemporary controversy regarding the

practice's authenticity in Islam, he writes: '[I]nsofar as its practitioners claimed it was Islamic, we can accept it as such, especially since it and its associated "esoteric sciences" were so effective in spreading a clearly identified Islamic religious culture in sub-Saharan Africa' (Brenner 2000: 50). Islamic studies scholar Ousmane Kane describes esoteric knowledge as 'expressed through a magical usage of the Koran' that 'enabled Muslim scholars [marabouts] to respond to the demand of a clientele that was looking for happiness, a cure, prosperity, fecundity, and protection against enemies (both real and imaginary)' (Kane 2012: 29). Acknowledging marabouts' importance in the precolonial period, he notes that 'up to the present day, the clientele of these marabouts has not diminished, however much the modernization theories might deplore it' (*ibid.*). On maraboutage – 'referring to the entire range of esoteric knowledge and practices in which marabouts specialize, including amulet-making and divination' (Mommersteeg 2011: 24), anthropologist Mommersteeg writes:

[T]he marabouts' knowledge covers the entire realm of well-being. The various features of the human plight, from existential problems to the uncertainties of daily life, are dealt with. Their knowledge concerns as much the religious rules the believer has to follow in order to be rewarded in the afterlife as it does the ways in which prosperity can be obtained in the here and now. (Mommersteeg 1999: 30)

These accounts highlight the significance of esoteric knowledge and practices such as geomancy to daily life and existence for many West African Muslims.

In Djanikoro, a local official whom Islamic Relief had arranged to act as my guide told me that he and his wife visited the shrine when they were having trouble conceiving. He made an offering to Djitoumou Moussa and his wife became pregnant with their first son. He explained that, when this happens, and the child is a boy, one has to name the child Moussa, otherwise he may become sick. He also said his family now must make an offering every year to keep their son healthy. The shrine was a significant place for people to consult for comfort and help in their day-to-day lives. Of the villagers I spoke to, all identified as Muslim and felt no discrepancy between making offerings to Djitoumou Moussa and their faith as Muslims.

Yet, despite the significance of esoteric sciences to many local Muslims, Amadou's interpretation – as evidenced by his contempt towards the shrine as 'like idol worship' and a corruption of 'authentic' Islam – maps onto contemporary debates on Wahabi/Salafi influence over Islam as historically practised in West Africa (Kobo 2012). While this debate is often figured in terms of a religious-cum-geographical divide, with 'authentic' Islam practised in the Middle East and North Africa and 'heterodox' Islam practised in sub-Saharan Africa, this divide is also a racialized colonial legacy. The separation of Black from non-Black Africa and Islamic from 'not-authentically Islamic' (Ware 2014) Africa is part of an epistemological legacy of the French colonial concept of *Islam noir*.

In the nineteenth century, French and British colonial administrators who fancied themselves 'scholars', such as Paul Marty and Harold Ingrams, promoted the idea that Islam was the product of Arab genius (Ware 2014: 19) and simultaneously advanced claims that Black Africans were primitive and uncivilized, justifying the 'civilizing mission' of colonialism. In the early decades of the twentieth century, French concern

with the perceived threat of so-called Arab Islam brought about a different idea of 'African Islam' as a source of possible allies to colonial interests (Seesemann 2011: 11). As historian Baz Lecocq writes, 'Arab Islam in North Africa was perceived to be orthodox, based in scripture, and legalistic and fanatic in nature ... "Black Islam" in sub-Saharan Africa was seen as syncretic, infused with magical praxis, more tolerant and less fanatic' (Lecocq 2015: 30).

This debate over authentic Islamic practice continues to play out today in Mali. For example, some Malian staff identified themselves as 'Sunna' (often referred to as Salafi in related literature). As one staff member explained to me: 'Sunna people do not have a special leader.' He continued that he would follow only those who authentically follow the Qur'an and Hadith. He told me that Djitoumou Moussa was an animist and that those who said he saw the future were liars. A similar line of thinking about supposedly animist impurities in Malian Muslim practice led to the destruction of shrines and the burning of libraries throughout the Sahel; this heightened after the coup and insurrection in Mali in 2012 that took place just weeks after the fundraisers' visit.⁸

Yet the fundraisers did not have the time or the means to engage with these local histories or debates. As a few explained to me, they worked tirelessly in the UK, fundraising from Muslim donors. 'Donors will give,' one said. 'You just have to tell them in the way they want to hear.' This was why they were in Mali and why they asked local staff and beneficiaries so many questions. 'We have to know so much about the projects. Donors want to know everything about the programmes; we have to be prepared with any and all answers.' They saw their job as one of translating local conditions in Mali to donors in the UK in the way that would procure the most funds. Yet they were not able to 'see' local conditions outside the lens of 'development'. When fundraisers asked beneficiaries what they most needed, many asked for practical things such as help getting a job, better equipment to collect shea nuts, or fencing to protect gardens from animals. Whereas these kinds of requests have historically been incorporated as part of Islamic esoteric practices in the region, these needs were translated by fundraisers into development 'deliverables' that would be meaningful to donors in the UK.⁹

Islamic Relief fundraisers approached the village of Djanikoro as the site of a school and could not see or engage with local esoteric practices, despite the significance of these practices to locals' own sense of well-being. And while local Malian Islamic Relief staff could see and understand villagers on their own terms – and were well aware of maraboutage – they too engaged local communities in terms of modernist, white-adjacent development. While local Islamic Relief staff participated in the debate as to what constitutes proper Islamic practice – as evidenced by Amadou

⁸ 'Ansar Dine destroy more shrines in Mali', *Al-Jazeera*, 10 July 2012 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/7/10/ansar-dine-destroy-more-shrines-in-mali>>.

⁹ During a visit to a women's microcredit group, women explained to fundraisers how they used their loans from Islamic Relief. The women formed an association and each member used half of their allocated funds on individual enterprises such as tailoring, cooking, selling fish or clothing, and the other half was used as a group initiative to make and sell peanut butter. In response, one fundraiser said: 'So you're talking here about empowerment.' When the local Islamic Relief staff member explained that the women no longer required loans because they had accumulated enough capital that they were now using their own money, the same fundraiser responded: 'This is about dignity and respect.'

and other staff members who critiqued the shrine and claimed that Djitoumou Moussa was an animist – they too conceived of ‘development’ in terms of achievable deliverables such as building a school, providing microcredit loans or constructing a rural maternity centre.

Islamic Relief distinguishes itself from non-Muslim humanitarian and development actors by sharing a religious background with Muslim beneficiaries in West Africa, yet, constrained by a white-adjacent logic of development, it participates in a universalizing technocratic apparatus that renders esoteric Muslim practices such as geomancy ‘invisible’. ‘Development’ – even Islamically guided development as practised by Islamic Relief – remains a one-way exchange that upholds a racialized hierarchy between the ‘primitive’ and the ‘modern’.

Conclusion: racializing development and the limits to Muslim solidarity

Attending to logics of racialization in a global Muslim development NGO highlights the extent to which processes of racialization are context-dependent. The young male fundraisers in Islamic Relief are subject to white supremacy in the form of anti-Muslim racism in the UK, but when ‘doing development’ in West Africa, they are aligned with whiteness and the white liberal project of ‘developing’ Africa. While complicit in a project of white-adjacent development in West Africa, these young Muslim men do not benefit from whiteness when they return home. In Mali, they enacted an ethic of humility in relation to beneficiaries. One fundraiser repeated how honoured they were to be there, telling beneficiaries that they saw them as their ‘mothers, brothers and sisters’, and asked them to help him understand their situation so that he could take what he learned back to donors in the UK. Visiting development project sites throughout Mali, they saw situations in which they could use their relative material security coming from the UK to, as one put it, fulfil ‘our duty . . . to help those not as fortunate as us’. Thus, while I describe Islamic Relief’s work in Mali as white-adjacent, I also recognize the significance for the thousands of Muslims who work for Islamic Relief around the world, and for the dozens I was able to speak with directly, the pride in and importance of their ethical and political work. It is the epistemological and material foundations of development in Africa that I align with whiteness.

Despite genuine claims that Islamic Relief adapts to local practices of Islam, the structure of international aid – one in which the allocations of funds are based on outside development ‘experts’ parachuting in to analyse local conditions – allows no time, or space, to engage with the complex debates and negotiations of what constitutes Islamic practice in a particular context. And given a broader conception of development – as the articulation of a better future – how Islam figures in this vision is significant in this Muslim context. In a story considering what it means to do good, and more specifically what it means for Muslims in the West to do good in Africa, anti-Muslim racism and the whiteness of development constrain the possibilities and limitations of Islamic Relief’s engagement with Muslim populations in Mali.

Incorporating a Black Marxist critique of development shows how the focus on the technical procedures of development and fundraising conceals the ongoing underdevelopment of Africa through racial capitalism. Despite shifts in discourse from ‘civilizing’ to ‘modernizing’ to ‘empowering’, the global balance of white

supremacist racial capitalism remains. Foregrounding the whiteness of development also shows how modernist development practice makes it impossible to see other ways of conceptualizing 'doing good' that are also deeply grounded in Islam.

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