

# **(Re)Building Epistemology or (Re)Shaping Societal Outlook**

## **A critique of the Sudan's Islamisation of knowledge paradigm**

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### **Introduction**

Across Africa, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, educationists, policymakers, intellectuals, and theologians began to turn their focus toward the subject of Islamic higher education on the continent. The nascent Islam-informed field of epistemological development, and its potential ability to serve as a response to contemporary Muslim societal challenges, began to dominate scholarly debate. In the 1970s, these intellectual pursuits led to the emergence of a new movement called “the Islamisation of knowledge”. This new epistemic paradigm aimed – and still aims – to (re)shape higher education policy and practice in accordance with Islamic teachings. It seeks to combine academic excellence with Islamic knowledge, incorporate Islamic teachings and ethics into the university curriculum, and (re)map the political economy of knowledge production in African Muslim societies. Proponents of this paradigm seek to promote Islamic epistemology through organising academic conferences, seminars, symposia, and lectures on the challenges facing Muslim higher education.

Participants in these forums recognise that the state of Muslim higher education in Africa and elsewhere is tenuous, and they envision possibilities for its pedagogical reformation and transformation. These measures of re-configuration give rise to Islamic higher educational consciousness among Muslims and heighten the urgent need for modern Islamic universities, colleges, research institutions, and centres that approach knowledge from an Islamic epistemology perspective. Since the emergence of the Islamisation of

knowledge paradigm, Islamic universities and colleges have been established in countries across Africa, even in minority Muslim countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, South Africa, and Uganda, to provide tertiary education and skilful training in various fields of Islamic, social, and natural sciences (Lo and Haron 2016). Furthermore, institutions and individuals have established publication houses and academic journals across African Muslim societies to decolonise knowledge, develop Islam-oriented educational materials, and spread new epistemic theories and methodologies responsive to Muslim worldviews and ontological realities.

However, the Islamisation of knowledge project seems to suffer serious epistemological and methodological shortcomings, rendering its reconfiguration efforts ineffective in dealing with issues of coloniality of power, asymmetry in knowledge production, and Muslim educational challenges. Thus, rather than producing an integrated epistemology to advance cognitive emancipation, the project's educational practices on the ground instead perpetuate the educational dichotomies (Western vs. Islamic) created during European colonialism. This article discusses some of these methodological shortcomings and epistemological contradictions. It highlights the socio-cultural diversity within African Muslim societies and epistemological differences in knowledge production between Islamic and Western paradigms. This research explores how the Islamisation trend attempts to eschew Western-centred knowledge and refine or (re)define modern disciplinary specialisations according to an Islamic epistemology perspective. It also engages a broader discourse on Muslim knowledge politics, critically highlighting various dichotomisation narratives such as reason vs. faith, epistemic certainty vs. scepticism, dualism vs. integration, and androcentric values vs. liberation. The article enriches and substantiates the discussion on these various thematic subjects with a thick ethnography and rigorous anthropological analysis drawing from field research in the Sudan in 2019 and 2020. It mediates the diverse voices of protagonists and antagonists in the domains of Islamic epistemology in general and the Islamisation of knowledge in particular.

Islamisation and the politics of its knowledge (re)production and transmission are complex, multi-dimensional epistemic phenomena with serious institutional repercussions in the Sudan. The unfolding discourse on the Islamisation of knowledge in the Sudan between 1989 and 2019 intertwined with the construction of a new Islamic state imagined and promoted by Islamist intellectuals who were inspired by a narrow interpretation of Islamic law to establish political legitimacy and governance. This (re)Islamisation of

society, knowledge, economics, politics, media, institutions, and public life led to the spread of religious symbols and activities in various state apparatuses. With the inception of an Islamist regime in 1989, the Islamisation of knowledge paradigm became a state-sponsored epistemic project, emerging within the matrix of a reinforced Islamic resurgence that attempted to combine modernity with faith. As part of my anthropological investigation of this phenomenon, I employed various social research methods to comprehend the theoretical dimensions of this subject, as well as its practices and methodologies on the ground. Between 2019 and 2020, I conducted six months of intermittent but intensive ethnographic research in Khartoum State. I chose this site for research because it is home to the Sudan's three major Islamic universities: Omdurman Islamic University, the University of Holy Qur'an and Islamic Sciences, and the International University of Africa. Khartoum State is significant in the context of the Islamisation trend and for its operationalisation strategies at institutional level. It also embraces religious groups with opposing epistemic orientations, ideologies, philosophies, learning styles, and intellectual traditions. Khartoum State is home to the Sudan's capital city of Khartoum, where education policy is created and dispatched throughout the country and beyond. Furthermore, Khartoum State has deep roots in traditional higher Islamic learning, characterised by both embodied and intellectual approaches to Islamic knowledge production and transmission, as well as by secular-oriented academic institutions of higher education that were established during British colonialism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Part of my fieldwork consisted of conducting interviews with key players in this field. I interviewed policymakers who chart the course of higher education in the Sudan and university administrators who implement these policies. I interviewed the educators and lecturers who impart Islam-oriented knowledge and practice to their students. In these encounters, I sought to learn more about the academic backgrounds of these educators and hear their own reflections on the curricula that they prepare. I interviewed students who receive this knowledge and its representations, aiming to learn more about their own reading and perceptions of the religious textbooks and other educational materials they use in their programmes. We also discussed issues such as enrolment in Islamic universities and the motives behind those decisions. I engaged with scholars who work on the Islamisation of knowledge within Islamic universities or research centres and who either promote or oppose specific epistemic orientations and ideologies.

To enrich my ethnography, I conducted intimate focus group discussions with small groups of interlocutors including research participants with shared experiences, expertise, and practices. Groups included, for example, cohorts of students, lecturers, policymakers, educators, pedagogists, and administrators. I considered gender, age range, and social background in forming these groups to ensure their productivity. I guided discussions by asking open-ended questions that would elicit insight into participants' attitudes, beliefs, opinions, perceptions, and practices surrounding Islamisation policy and procedures. Through group discussions, I sought to bring together members of a shared practice to articulate and reflect in friendly conversations about their understandings of and experiences with the Islamisation process and its related practices within the three Islamic universities. The advantage of this method was that it allowed interlocutors to interact with, validate, and question each other on these topics. Furthermore, it generated a social environment in which conversations occurred more naturally than they might have in individual interviews. Such group discussions, in turn, assisted me in exploring new ideas and unforeseen issues regarding the Islamisation of knowledge and helped me clarify opinions that were held by members of a group. They also led me to other potential interlocutors considered to be knowledgeable or active in this domain. In these discussions, I paid attention to nonverbal communication cues and reactions, such as facial expressions, emotions, and tones of voice.

During group discussions, I not only paid attention to what interlocutors were saying, but also made inferences based on their actions. I attended lectures and seminars with students to observe the interactions between lecturers and students and to learn more about the ideas that were communicated in those milieux. My participation in the lectures and seminars also offered insight into how learning and knowing are created and negotiated inside the classroom. Outside the classroom, I socialised with students to become more familiar with their educational perspectives. Utilising a similar technique with lecturers enabled me to obtain valuable ethnographic data by revealing discrepancies between what interlocutors were saying and what they were doing in their day-to-day activities within and outside universities. I developed rapports with research participants to consolidate data collection. I also attended workshops and conferences organised by Islamic universities and their partners to uncover the scholarly networks and research interests these universities pursue. I participated in public lectures organised by Islamic universities on campuses and elsewhere. These lectures formed scholarly fo-

rooms where students, lecturers, university administrators, and the general public exchanged and debated ideas. Through my participation in public lectures, I discerned which ideas, thematic issues, and forms of knowledge Islamic universities intended to transmit to the public and why. This activity also afforded me an opportunity to interview the organisers, speakers, and audience members.

The discussion in this article is not a comprehensive treatment of the subject of Islamisation of knowledge, but rather, a brief articulation of some of its shortcomings and epistemological contradictions, evident in the methodology and practices of the Islamisation project. These contradictions include, for instance, diversity vs. homogeneity discourse, refining vs. creating disciplines, scepticism vs. certainty, reason vs. faith, dichotomous vs. integrative curricula, and conservatism vs. liberalism.

## Diversity vs. homogeneity

The practice and experience of Islam in one culture or society may appear to be distinct from those in others. Muslim societies hold a variety of beliefs, practices, ideologies, epistemologies, methodologies of learning, social structures, and cultural values. Manger (2002) argues that this diversity is sustained by a broad spectrum of Islamic experience, knowledge systems, and educational philosophies. The textual sources that Muslims most frequently turn to in their learning institutions are the Qur'an, the *ḥadīth*, *ijma'* (the juristic consensus), and *qiyās* (reasoning by analogy). These sources also form epistemic principles of knowledge production and transmission that supersede theological realms and hermeneutics. However, Muslims in any given society consult, study, and interpret these scriptural texts differently, depending on their own socio-cultural and/or ideological justifications and logics. On Muslim diversity, Sardar argues that "we Muslims live as composite identities: various interpretations of Islam, with their various histories, cultural, regional, ethnic variations, and now national divergences, are always part of our individual and collective personalities" (Sardar 2004: 184). It is common for Muslims who come from different cultural backgrounds and nationalities and who possess diverse world-views and philosophies to interpret Islamic texts and sources differently. It is also normal for Muslims to use those texts in different ways and for different purposes, depending on their understandings and the ideological or epistemological principles on which their interpretations are based. This variety in

Muslim practice impacts the Islamisation of knowledge paradigm and its epistemic orientation in the Muslim world today.

Multiple interpretations and different forms of knowledge exist not only among Muslim scholars but also among ordinary Muslims who are influenced by or exposed to Islamic scholarships via prevalent discourse on the politics of knowledge production and transmission. Such plurality manifests itself in different societal aspects, such as gender, class, ethnicity, education, and interpretation of knowledge. This diversity strengthens the notion that Islam comprises not only cosmological themes of the holy texts, but also lived identities, ideological orientations, epistemological approaches to knowledge, and experiences in social contexts, each emerging within ongoing debates and discourses about what is right and what is wrong when viewed from socio-cultural and religious perspectives (Manger 2013: 18). Such a multiplicity is manifested in education, which encompasses a wide spectrum of learning experiences, methods, forms of knowledge, and scholarly practices across Muslim societies.

The call to shift epistemic orientation from Western to Islamic is a common theme in the discourse on decolonisation and Islamic educational reform. Because they have initiated and proceeded to implement its policy and practices on the ground, Islamisation of knowledge enthusiasts in general and reformation activists, such as Islamists attempting to build an Islamic state in particular, have the louder [or stronger] voice in this epistemic reformation process. They have politicised the Islamisation of knowledge discourse since its inception, incorporating its epistemic narratives into their ideological agenda. This concern [endeavour] has also drifted into epistemological debates over de-Westernisation, de-secularisation, de-colonisation, and educational reform directed toward political activism imbued with Islamism tendencies and its version of Islamic interpretation. Thus, the movement to Islamise knowledge pays little attention to the diversified views held by Muslim scholars and intellectuals about the nature of knowledge and knowing.

The movement constructs its conceptualisation of educational problems and epistemic future prospects on homogenous and universalistic categorisations such as the *ummah* as a way to address Muslims collectively and unify their epistemic dilemma. Here, the *ummah* is a universal community of believers whose members commit themselves to Islam and its socio-religious orders. Beneath the surface of a common commitment to Islam, there are variety of ethnicities, cultures, socio-cultural orders, and intellectual traditions that cannot be overlooked when designing a new epistemic policy and practice to be pursued and implemented by all Muslims. Islamisation theorists use the term

*ummah* in its original form and insist that it should not be translated into other languages lest its Islamic meaning is distorted (Al-Alwani 2005; Al-Fârûqî 1989; Sardar 2004). In his critique of the Islamisation project and its pioneers, Sardar explains that the religious commonality established through the concept of *ummah* “is not synonymous with ‘the people’, or ‘the nation’, or ‘the state’ or any other expression which is determined by race, geography, language, history or any combination of these” (Sardar 2004: 194–195). The term, therefore, becomes a methodological tool for transcending Western political concepts that confine individuals into certain identifications and territorial belongings. Protagonists of the movement try alternatively to establish faith-based universalism that transcends locality, regionalism, nationalism and other forms of limited belonging. They communicate the notion that the concept is trans-geographical, trans-local, trans-cultural, trans-racial, and trans-class. This implies that the concept is non-discriminatory in the context of Muslims and thus it can be utilised analytically for the development of unitary Islamic epistemology and its implementation thereafter. The concept of *ummah* therefore serves as a referent of unity and cooperation and shapes the historical and contemporary consciousness of Muslimness as a common identity that surpasses socio-political and cultural boundaries and pluralism. The notion of *ummah* goes beyond the politics of homeland and nation-state intending to offer an alternative conception of universality built ontologically from the Islamic ethos and divine imperative. It influences unitary consciousness, shapes political behaviour of solidarity, and creates a conception of international society whose commonality and collectiveness are derived from Islam-centred civilisation, epistemology, and way of life (see Shani 2008). In this discourse, educational policy that draws its inspiration from sectarianism, Sufism, or traditionalism is regarded as divisive and anachronistic and therefore inappropriate or irrelevant to the projects of decolonisation and Muslim educational reform.

It is for this reason that the movement to Islamise knowledge overlooks Sufi and traditionalist approaches to knowledge production, claiming that they are backward, repetitive, and limited to theology, rote memorisation, and asceticism and therefore cannot deal with contemporary Muslim societal and educational problems. This limitation meets resistance to the Islamisation of knowledge programmes in Muslim societies where Sufism and traditionalism are dominant religious forces on the socio-political and educational landscape. The resistance often regards the Islamisation of knowledge as ideological Islamist training rather than as an epistemological reform initiative intended to liberate Muslim minds from coloniality and advance Muslim societies. Mabud

argues that the need to make education Islamic is perhaps shared by many Muslim scholars. However, the definition of Islamisation, its methodological approach and epistemological contents are greatly contested, as these scholars come from different intellectual traditions and cultural backgrounds (Mabud 2016: 132). Thus, diverse Islamic philosophical understandings of knowledge yield multiple scholarly approaches to the idea of the Islamisation of knowledge.

Islamisation of knowledge proponents treat Muslim communities in isolation, as if the detrimental influence of Western epistemology is experienced only by Muslims or as if the epistemic problem of other religious communities living with Muslims is not their main educational concern. Thus, the Islamisation of knowledge movement pays little or no attention to the presence of non-Muslim populations who live in Muslim majority countries (Ashraf 1990). This indifference to other faiths' educational premises becomes problematic in national educational discourse in some countries where Christians and other religious communities constitute a considerable number. For instance, when Islamists introduced the Islamisation of knowledge and society in the Sudan, people from southern part of the country, the Blue Nile Region, and the Nuba Mountains, regarded it as an internal neo-colonialism since its programmes were designed to (re)shape the epistemic and socio-cultural values of all Sudanese people in accordance with Islamic and Arabic culture. The reason behind this conception was that the Islamisation of knowledge movement has failed to produce comprehensive epistemic reform programmes that are acceptable to all cultures within Sudanese society.

The Islamisation of knowledge project becomes more problematic when considering the management of diversity in the context of pluralistic and multi-cultural society. The movement calls for a unified system of education in which secular and Islamic schoolings are integrated into one unitary educational scheme. In this union, Islam is considered to be the driving spiritual force behind educational policy and practices in elementary and secondary schools as well as in colleges and universities. The epistemological union is believed to eliminate existing shortcomings, such as so-called archaic textbooks, untrained teachers at traditional Islamic schools, and the alienating mimicry of the secular West. Al-Fârûqî (1989) claims that the condition of being civil consists in the acquisition of knowledge of Islamic civilisation, which covers subjects such as the ethics, law, culture, and heritages of Islam. He argues for mandatory acquisition of this knowledge for Muslims and non-Muslims alike

at university level, regardless of their specialisations and religious professions. He states:

“It is not possible to be civil without such knowledge [of Islamic civilization]. Even if students belong to a non-Muslim minority, it should not absolve them from fulfilling this basic requirement. Since they or their parents have opted to become citizens of the Islamic state, they must acquire the necessary familiarity with the civilization in which they are living and with the spirit and hope that move this civilization and its compatriots. No person may be left without such acculturation, which is basic for “socialization” or integration into Muslim society” (Al-Fârûqî 1989: 16).

Al-Fârûqî condemns colonialism for imposing Western culture and epistemology onto Muslim societies. In his education philosophy, however, he proposes an epistemic policy that is very similar to the colonial one when he makes Islamic education mandatory for minority non-Muslims who live among Muslims. These minorities, without doubt, have their own ideas about what kind of education they want to pursue. The very idea of demanding non-Muslims' familiarity with Islamic civilisation seems to contradict Al-Fârûqî's emancipatory arguments.

In order to address the shortcoming of this epistemic philosophy, the Islamic Academy of the United Kingdom organised a series of public lectures, seminars, and conferences at the University of Cambridge in 1989 and 1990 (see Mabud 2016). These forums brought together Muslims from different intellectual traditions and Christian educationists to establish a dialogue and discuss faith as a shared epistemological basis for educational reform that would draw from the spiritual values of both Islam and Christianity. The meetings sought to find a common spiritual ground for faith-based education in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society, aiming at establishing a shared set of beliefs held by Muslims, Christians, and other religious believers. The unifying epistemological characters of Islam and Christianity centre on the belief in the necessity for divine guidance, transcendental afterlife, and the existence of spirit and soul in human beings. As these qualities inform the educational philosophies of both Islam and Christianity, the multi-faith forums intended to produce a faith-based education policy that would be acceptable in multi-cultural societies.

## Refining vs. creating disciplines

The movement to Islamise knowledge aims to recast the essentially modern disciplines (such as sociology, anthropology, history, and political science) taught at universities in Muslim societies and, further, to set these disciplines within the context of Islamic worldviews. Proponents thus attempt to bring secular epistemologies and methodologies into line with Islamic teachings. Some advocate for refining the Western epistemic representation of these modern disciplines while others advocate for creating new disciplines based on Islamic epistemology and informed by the socio-cultural, political, and economic, ontological realities of the Muslim world. As a starting point, Al-Fârûqî, who drafted a blueprint for the Islamisation project in 1989, demands that Muslim scholars and intellectuals should master and critically assess both secular and Islamic disciplines, surveying the intellectual problems facing Muslims and restructuring the disciplines in the framework of Islamic epistemology (Al-Fârûqî 1989). Mohamed argues that “the modern discipline as such is not refuted but is Islamized; it is not replaced by an alternative Islamic discipline but is modified to be more in congruence with the Islamic outlook” (Mohamed 1991: 285–286). Nasr (1991) makes a similar argument, emphasising that “Muslims need not claim a new science, but merely look upon it from an Islamic perspective” (Nasr 1991: 399). These admonitions encourage activists to (re)formulate disciplinary outlooks in accordance with an Islamic worldview, rather than produce new fields of knowledge.

The Islamisation of knowledge paradigm, then, deals with methodological rather than epistemological issues. From this reformist educational perspective, the mastery of modern disciplines requires skilled theoretical understanding of Western-informed-secular disciplines, critically engaging their epistemology as well as their methodology of knowledge production and transmission. These methods are employed to refine secular disciplines from Western representation, cultural bias, and worldviews and then integrate their refined contents into “the corpus of the Islamic legacy by eliminating, amending, reinterpreting and adopting its components as the worldview of Islam and its values dictate” (Al-Fârûqî 1989: 18). This reinvigoration process – and its expected outcome – attempt to elbow out the coloniality of education and (re)create new forms of knowledge rooted in Islam.

Ashraf, a Saudi Arabian educationist, reverses this proposition. He suggests that scholars and educationists lay an epistemological foundation for the Islamisation project by first formulating Islamic concepts for all disciplinary

specialisations and then proceeding to evaluate Western concepts in light of the newly founded Islamic concepts (Ashraf 1991: 81–101). Both propositions prioritise methodology and neglect epistemology, [the latter being] a key issue in any discourse on de-Westernisation, de-secularisation, and de-colonialisation. However, Al-Turabi, a Sudanese thinker and founder of the Islamist state in the Sudan, maintains that the Islamisation of knowledge cannot be fully achieved until community leaders Islamise other areas of [the] Muslim lifeworld (Al-Turabi 2010). Utilising state power, the Islamists under his leadership launched what they called a “comprehensive call to Islam” in which all aspects of Sudanese lifeworlds were subjected to a thorough Islamisation process. The motive behind this comprehensive Islamisation was to build a foundation for an Islamic state by (re)engineering society and (re)shaping its socio-cultural values in accordance with specific Islamic interpretation. In this context, Islamisation was a state-sponsored project between 1989 and 2019, when Islamists ruled the country, and it aimed to create a state that Islamised knowledge, economics, law, and society, etc.

These propositions for epistemological Islamic reconfiguration generate enormous enthusiasm among Muslim intellectuals and educationists trying to (re)shape educational policy and practice as a departure from the colonial education legacy manifested in contemporary educational institutions in Muslim societies (AbuSulayman 1993; Al-Alwani 2005; Al-Attas 1985; Al-Fârûqî 1989, 1992; Al-Turabi 2010; Hamad 2013; Khalil 2006). The reconfiguration discourses also level serious criticism against the Islamisation paradigm accusing it of trying to build an intellectual wall around Muslim societies. They also assert that the Islamisation of knowledge methodology relies on an authoritarian control of knowledge and therefore can only perpetuate, not resolve, the intellectual predicaments facing the Muslim world (Bukhari 2019; Mabud 2016; Nasr 1991; Paya 2022).

Some thinkers completely reject the Islamisation of knowledge as an epistemic paradigm for educational reformation, an instrument for decolonisation, and a methodology of transformation. Such detractors believe that the contents and methodologies of these academic disciplines are too deeply permeated by secularist, materialist, and colonialist epistemic values (see Sardar 2004: 201) to become successfully Islamised. Sardar problematises the very notion of Islamising modern disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, arguing that these were born within the matrix of the Western worldview and that their theories and epistemic contents were thus shaped by Western cultures and reasoning. He writes that “the division of

knowledge into the various disciplines that we find today is a particular manifestation of how the Western worldview perceives reality and how Western civilization sees its problems” (ibid.: 192). This argument provincialises modern disciplines and highlights their incompatibility with non-Western civilisations.

The Islamisation of knowledge critique refutes the presentation of Western epistemology as a universal paradigm that can be translated into different cultures. Alternatively, the Islamisation trend presents a new model of social science based on Islamic premises. For example, the movement disapproves of the wide recognition and acknowledgement of Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857), whose ideas – as the [supposed] father of social sciences – were fundamental to the development of social sciences in Western epistemology: instead, it sees Ibn Khaldun (1332 – 1406) in this role. Connell criticises such undertakings, arguing that this alteration offers only rhetorical satisfaction as it is futile to challenge Western epistemological “predominance by discovering alternative ‘founding fathers’ of the same social science” while embracing the discipline’s methodology and scientific approach to knowledge production (Connell 2007: xi). However, the Islamisation of knowledge project goes beyond merely identifying an alternative father to social science. It engages broader epistemological questions that deal with the theorisation of Muslim thought, education, and civilisation, and proposes a new methodological approach imbued with [an/the] Islamic worldview to handle these epistemic problems. The critical question here is: to what extent is the Islamisation of knowledge paradigm an appropriate theoretical, methodological tool for addressing Muslim educational dilemmas and the epistemic injustice produced by European colonialism?

The movement’s preparation to recast the discipline of anthropology in accordance with Islamic values provides one example of the issues raised during this process. Some Islamisation of knowledge enthusiasts perceive Western anthropology as a product of colonial enterprise. After all, the Western scholars trained in this discipline played a crucial role in aiding colonial administrations in establishing new rules over the colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. For example, Ahmed (1986) does not reject the discipline of anthropology as such, but rather tries to correct its prejudices, eliminate its shortcomings, and redress its methodological bias as well as its racialised concepts of otherness and exotic representations. The ethnocentrist view of reality, which dominates anthropological works in the West, as well as the categorisation of colonised societies in terms of their ethnic characteristics are among Ahmed’s key critiques

of Western anthropology. He does not trace the origin of anthropology back to European colonialism, but rather to the rich history of Islamic intellectual tradition. He reads the discipline of anthropology comparatively against Islamic historiographical scholarship, arguing that the discipline of anthropology has content which corresponds with features present within the Islamic intellectual legacy. However, anthropology as a disciplinary specialisation did not exist in the Islamic scholarship legacy under the same designation. Ahmed (1986) argues that anthropology is not actually a creation of Western imperialism, as many assume:

“The work of Ibn Khaldun is reflected – with theoretical frame and supporting data – in that of some of the most influential contemporary Western theorists including Karl Marx, Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto and Ernest Gellner. Weber’s typology of leadership, Pareto’s circulation of elites, and Gellner’s pendulum swing theory of Muslim society betray the influence of Ibn Khaldun. It is indeed a tragedy that the science of sociology or anthropology did not develop after Ibn Khaldun” (Ahmed 1986: 56).

Islamisation of knowledge enthusiasts categorise other classical works as anthropological, including sociological works by al-Birûnî (973 – 1048), Ibn Battûta (1304 – 1368), and al-Mas’ûdî (896 – 956) because of the methods these scholars applied to the process of data collection and analysis. These classical scholars conducted extended participant observation of cultures other than their own and employed comparative methods of data collection and analysis in their ethnographic works. Thus, Ahmed (1984, 1986) identifies al-Birûnî as a father of anthropology, substantiating his argument with the example of al-Birûnî’s study of Hindu as well as the research methodology that he adopted [devised] during that historical scholarship. In contemporary classification terms, Ahmed categorises al-Birûnî’s classical work as anthropology par excellence in both epistemological and methodological terms. This position does not deconstruct anthropology as a discipline but (re)directs its methodology of otherness [and othering] toward fairness and equity, urging anthropologists to record reflexively Muslim societies as they are in time and space – and to avoid distortion and misrepresentation. In practice, Islamic universities have different attitudes toward the discipline of anthropology. During fieldwork in the Sudan’s three main Islamic universities between 2019 and 2020, I observed that curriculum designers either dismiss the discipline of anthropology as a colonial epistemic instrument for Western domination or incorporate it into

the discipline of sociology, anchoring its foundational roots in classical Islamic scholarship.

Unlike Ahmed, who supports disciplinary appropriation, other theorists of pro-Islamic epistemology oppose it. For example, Sardar proposes that Muslim scholars and educationalists “develop their own disciplines based on their own cultural context and geared to solving their own problems” (Sardar 2004: 200) instead of Islamising Western-oriented disciplines, such as anthropology, which was historically born out of colonialism. Islamising disciplines, Sardar continues, is not a viable epistemic project when one considers the conflict between secular-oriented knowledge and the vision of Islam that seeks to produce knowledge grounded in the ontological realities of Muslims. Sardar worries that the appropriation methodology adopted by some Islamisation of knowledge theorists and their one-dimensional prescription for epistemic reformation “is tantamount to a cosmetic epistemological face-lift and nothing more” (ibid.: 201). He substantiates his reluctance toward disciplinary appropriation by arguing that those attempting to recast these disciplines in accordance with Islamic axiology are already infused with secularist ethics, a materialist metaphysical disposition and positivist epistemic orientations. Thus, this (re)appropriation, at best, “would perpetuate the dichotomy of secular and Islamic knowledge that you [Muslims] are so keen to transcend” (ibid.: 201) in contemporary disciplinary taxonomies.

The nomenclature of social science disciplines is problematic in the Islamisation of knowledge discourse because of the differences in disciplinary taxonomies between Islamic and Western epistemology. Al-Alwani argues that many of the thematic subjects studied today in the social sciences were treated in classical Islamic scholarship through the medium of *fiqh* (jurisprudence and Islamic laws) or *fiqh al-Aḥkām al-Sultāniyyah* (the precepts of power). He gives examples of categories such as systems of governance, political theory, international relations, laws, social welfare, and methods of political analysis that are studied in universities as part of contemporary knowledge (Al-Alwani 1990: 9). Here, the epistemological challenge is how to (re)establish a sound disciplinary foundation for social sciences while also taking into consideration the classical legacy of Islamic jurisprudence as well as sources of knowledge and the Western disciplinary taxonomies which are prevalent in today’s academic institutions within Muslim societies. Educationists usually approach this challenge relationally, by reading and interpreting the past critically in order to expand epistemic boundaries: they deconstruct modern disciplines theoretically and methodologically so as to (re)construct them in the light of Islamic episte-

mology. In this disciplinary (re)arrangement where educationists benefit from all forms of knowledge, Islamic epistemology becomes a centre of relationality and a methodological lens through which the (re)arrangement process passes into the new state of Islam-centred disciplines.

However, such (re)arrangement has limitations. It is a daunting challenge to produce reliable academic materials to cover all areas of the thematic subjects studied in modern disciplines. In this regard, Al-Alwani (1990) argues that Muslim scholars and educationists have difficulty in dissociating sociological aspects from theological aspects. Because there is no clear distinction between them in Islamic sources of knowledge, it is impossible to draw “well-defined divisions among these aspects in the same way that there are divisions among the various contemporary social sciences” (Al-Alwani 1990: 10). Taking the example of political science in Islamic universities, Al-Alwani explicates that the departments of Islam-centred political science face a tremendous challenge “in presenting material on political science in the Islamic tradition in a methodical manner befitting the educational and academic purposes for which they were established” (ibid.: 10). Such a predicament creates an intellectual void and further exacerbates the crisis of thought and epistemic dichotomies (secular vs. Islamic) in Muslim academic institutions. Akram argues that the discipline of political science in Islamic epistemology is a branch of theology since it imperatively depends on spirituality and cannot therefore inspire independent intellectual speculation (Akram 2007). In this sense, the distinction between secular and spiritual domains becomes meaningless in Islamic epistemological discourse.

However, the most problematic dimension of this debate is social dynamism, which necessitates changes in epistemologies and methodologies. According to Sardar, the secular-oriented epistemology of social sciences demands that “man should not believe in any predetermined code for a society but accept the principle that society is a continually evolving and changing phenomenon. There is nothing permanent or unchanging about human nature” (Sardar 2004: 196). Our conditions as human beings are transient and should be theoretically and methodologically comprehended via transient concepts. This social dynamism applies to values, moralities, codes of conduct, practices, modes of thinking and belonging, ethics, and many different aspects of human behaviour and life. In this sense, thought, practice, and knowledge are socially constructed and therefore subject to constant de-construction, review, and re-construction. This ever-changing essence of lifeworlds (re)shapes epistemic practices and policies in the domains of

both secular and Islamic education. However, Sardar opines that scientific-informed dynamism in values and moralities contradicts that of the Islamic positionality on ethos, arguing that “Islam teaches that moral values do not change; hence Truth, Goodness, Righteousness, Mercy are constant factors” (ibid.: 196). Protagonists of Islamisation negate such positions by citing the popular phrase, “*al-Islâm ṣâliḥ li kuli zamân wa makân*” (Islam is relevant for all times and places), which is attributed to one of the prophetic sayings conveying the notion that Islam is a comprehensive way of life. In practice, enthusiasts of Islamisation attempt to realise this claimed relevance and settle this dynamism debate through analogical extension and juristic speculations such as *ijtihâd* (disciplined and creative intellectual effort) and *qiyâs* (reasoning by analogy). However, this analogical extension comes, epistemologically, more under the purview of theological discourse than within the sociological discussion of Islamic knowledge and its relevance today.

In the Islamisation of knowledge discourse, natural sciences are perceived to be less problematic because they deal with nature, unlike social sciences whose domain of inquiry is culture, which is always subject to interpretation. Thus, little effort is made to (re)appropriate and (re)arrange the natural sciences’ [curricula] to suit Islamic epistemology. Islamic universities in the Sudan operationalise the Islamisation process in faculties of natural and life sciences parallel to respective disciplinary specialisations by simply attaching courses on Islamic studies. The academic contents of natural and life sciences’ disciplinary courses in Islamic universities remain unaltered and therefore do not differ thematically from those of non-Islamic universities’ courses. Islamic courses are added because Islamic universities intend to produce polymath graduates who are not only qualified in their respective fields of study, but also knowledgeable in Islamic studies. However, some lecturers perceive such a polymathic methodological approach as an academic burden on students in the sense that it distracts them from concentrating on the disciplinary specialisations on which they would build their future careers. In this regard, one lecturer from the Faculty of Pharmacy of Omdurman Islamic University stated, “I don’t understand why my students must take courses on Islamic studies because they have not enrolled [at] the university to become religious scholars[,] but pharmacists”. This burden feels even heavier among students who are required by university administrations to study Islamic subjects regardless of their disciplinary specialisations or personal interests.

Furthermore, life sciences such as biology, whose epistemology drives from the evolutionary paradigm of knowledge production, are seen as more insid-

ious than natural sciences like physics. The Islamisation of knowledge project severely criticises the evolution theory's influence on biology because of its acute opposition to the idea of God's creation of (in)animate [entities] and the universe at large (see Nur 2022). This kind of conflict questions the viability of the Islamisation project and the suitability of its methodological approach in dealing with the epistemological reconfiguration of sciences in general and natural sciences in particular. Critics of the Islamisation project point to the (in)compatibility of natural sciences and Islamic epistemology. For instance, Sardar argues that "natural sciences are conceived as antithetical to nature, which can be twisted and tortured in the name of progress". In contrast to this scientific outlook, Sardar writes "Islam [...] does not encourage confrontation between man and nature. It teaches man to be 'natural' and thus work in harmony with nature" (Sardar 2004: 196). The Islamisation project has yet to practically address this kind of difference in epistemic orientation and outlook.

The Islamisation trend regards knowledge of the world as equally important to faith-based knowledge. Proponents urge Muslim scholars and educationists to understand the scientific world completely and integrate it into the main corpus of the nascent Islamic epistemology. Islamisation of knowledge theory is based upon the unity of truth, which devolves from the oneness of God. Its epistemic orientation rests on the idea that the truths conveyed in divine revelation cannot be different from those of reality. This divine truthfulness claim implies that if a researcher has conducted scientific research and yielded findings that contradict any element of the divine reality, then those findings must be reworked or considered false. In this sense, Islam is defined in religious terminologies and employed as a yardstick against which to measure epistemic practices on the ground and their (in)compatibility with the dictum of the nascent knowledge politics.

## **Islamisation of knowledge debates: Concluding remarks**

The Islamisation discourse was born out of a reaction to colonial, cultural and epistemic invasions, the secularisation of academic institutions, and Orientalism (Abaza 2000) and its misrepresentation of Islamic knowledge as anachronistic and unfit for scientific modernity. Other factors that triggered the Islamisation of knowledge debate are the decline of Islamic epistemology and Muslims' current uncritical attitude of mimicry in knowledge practices and modes of thinking rooted in other cultures and civilisations, especially

Eurocentrism with little or no critical engagement. Western-oriented education introduced to Muslim societies during European colonialism seems to have played an important role in creating this sense of mimicry, alienation, and estrangement. Moten (1990) also highlights the role of nostalgia in this process. According to Moten, Islamic epistemology, which once imparted life and motion to a great leading civilisation, is today confined to antiquated schools of thought and classical books (Moten 1990). As a critical response to intellectual modernity, the Islamisation discourse raises legitimate questions about epistemic emancipation, the decolonisation of knowledge and mind, and the indigenisation of social and natural sciences. Critical engagement in these issues was not only a concern of Muslims and their reaction to Orientalist scholarship, but also the subject of apprehension in many societies in the Global South who underwent similar arduous colonial experiences (Falola 2022; Freire 1998; Mudimbe 1988; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1981; Smith 2012; Santos 2014, 2018). Thus, the knowledge produced in the matrix of Islamisation served as an instrument for liberation, epistemic justice, restoration of authenticity, self-representation, comprehensive and self-contained philosophy for life. It is a form of knowledge born from the struggle against historical colonialism, the current state of coloniality, and its epistemic genocidal policy and hegemonic power apparatus.

The Islamisation of knowledge project has imbued the Muslim psyche with a sense of epistemic mission whose actualisation became increasingly urgent in many societies that prioritised a spiritual approach to scientific inquiry. Insurgent decolonial scholarship sees this faith-based approach to knowledge as an instrument for divesting modern disciplinary fields in academia and methodology of their Western representations and recasting them with an Islam-centred epistemology. Nasr argues that the Islamisation project “has produced a plethora of academic and ideological expositions on the place of Islam in intellectual inquiry and has ascertained the claim of Muslims to draw the boundaries of human knowledge anew” (1991: 387). The plethora of intellectual production in this nascent epistemological undertaking has “extended the purview of the Islamisation of knowledge project into every nook and cranny of academic thought” that encompasses social, natural, and life sciences (ibid.: 387). However, the epistemological claim of producing new forms of knowledge grounded in Islamic worldviews remains a tenuous proposition in Islamisation narratology because most of the decolonial claims in this discourse remain undelivered or unconsolidated into solid scientific gains. As a result, the Islamisation project is more of a theoretical intellectual

exercise than a practical solution. How Islamisation is actually performed and how it contributes to decolonisation remain unrealised. Adding the adjective “Islamic” to a discipline or adding Islamic courses to a disciplinary specialisation does not automatically transform the discipline’s epistemic orientation, as protagonists of the Islamisation of knowledge might think. The academic contents must undergo a thorough systematic review and methodological reconfiguration and (re)establishment to be considered Islamic and to reflect the essence of Islam-centred epistemology.

One of the foundational critiques of Western-centred epistemology on which the Islamisation of knowledge project builds its epistemic urgency and reform arguments is Comtean sociological positivism, which offers the idea that social phenomena can operate and be investigated in a systematic manner similar to that of physical phenomena. This positivist paradigm emerged historically in the matrix of the Enlightenment thinking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Europeans began to question despotism in religious institutions and governments. New Enlightenment ideas led to massive scientific advancement in the natural sciences. The Enlightenment’s foundation in methodological empiricism inspired social scientists to adopt similar scientific methods in their sociological investigations of societal problems. Under the influence of the positivist paradigm of scientific empiricism, theorists of social sciences and humanities tried to exclude non-observatory and non-sensorial ways of knowing such as faith-based epistemology, theology and intuition seeing these as vacuous kinds of knowledge. The Islamisation of knowledge trend regards the epistemic position that separates reason from revelation as reductionist, maintaining that non-observatory forms of knowledge, feelings, values, desires, beliefs, and transcendental thoughts are essential epistemological components.

While positivists reject metaphysical components in favour of sensory experiences or reasoning, ultimately, there are no such things as value-neutral knowledge and universal objective truth. Historical and social conditions inevitably affect the scholarly representation of social ideas. Moten argues that value-neutrality in knowledge production is a myth because values, of whatever kind, provide a matrix that (re)shapes the selection of thematic subjects for investigation, formulation of theoretical concepts, and selection of data for analysis and interpretation (Moten 1990: 169–170). The nascent Islamisation project adapts this kind of reflexive approach to refute the claims of positivists and critical rationalists. Proponents provincialise Western epistemology, pointing to the many interpretations of social phenomena that derive

from various epistemological understandings and intellectual traditions. The resurgent Islamisation paradigm attempts to put Muslim perspectives on knowledge production at the centre of epistemic orientation without necessarily excluding other intellectual traditions in its knowledge practices. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that the basis of absorbing the world is to know oneself and one's environment. This mode of thinking is part of a common desire in the Global South to move "the center from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1993: xvi). This insurgence of the marginalised assigns epistemic legitimacy and centrality to all cultures, thus emphasising plurality, multiplicity, and relationality as forces of dynamism and exchange.

The epistemological perspective of positivism led gradually to the rise of secularism in Europe, influencing the methodology of social sciences and research orientation. This paradigm shift instigated the development of secular-scientific ideology in the West and (re)shaped the politics of sociological knowledge production and ways of thinking not only in Western societies, but also in other societies that had fallen under Western hegemony during European colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This encounter resulted in an intellectual invasion of colonised societies and the marginalisation of their knowledge systems. While the positivist paradigm attempts to build an exclusive methodology based upon human reason, disregarding religious thoughts and the sacred legitimation of political power and authority, the Islamisation paradigm emphasises Islam-centred epistemology, examining social phenomena and individual behaviours within the context of a broader social system and considering the observable and non-observable dimensions of human experiences (Moten 1990). The reliability and comprehensiveness of this Islamic paradigm in addressing methodological problems and building an epistemology informed by Islamic worldviews and ontologies depends on how it conceives Islam and operationalises it in the process of knowledge production. This is because any attempt to (re)shape epistemology in accordance with the Islamic legacy raises scepticism about the nature of this legacy as well as the conflicting constitutive elements upon which theories of knowledge are constructed. As Mohamed (1991) argues, the Islamic legacy contains variant epistemological perspectives that emerge from conflicting schools of thought and different socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts (Mohamed 1991: 290). It is not a monolithic system of thought, as some protagonists of Islamisation of knowledge might suggest, but rather a multiple and relational body of ideas that allows for different approaches to knowledge.

The Qur'an, Sunnah or *ḥadīth*, *ijma'* (the juristic consensus), and *qiyās* (reasoning by analogy) are the main sources of Islamic knowledge in the Islamisation of knowledge project in the Sudan, in Africa, and across the Muslim world. In the debate over the Islamisation of knowledge, two main factors weaken a potential epistemology based [solely] on these four sources of Islamic knowledge. First, this debate implicitly defines Islam as a religion and therefore imposes an epistemic reductionism and limitation constraining the enhancement of knowledge. Second, subjective readings of the Qur'an and Sunnah as well as other sources yield multiple interpretations. These varied interpretations would inevitably produce variant worldviews and epistemic orientations and thus foster heterogeneity in religious thoughts. However, heterogeneity does not equate to a comprehensiveness in terms of ideas because the broader framework within which this multiplicity manifests itself is a religious edifice. Moreover, some scholars express scepticism toward the connection between knowledge and religion, arguing that it could create a metaphysical science that would impose religious oppression and systematic censorship on scientific ideas and scholarship in the name of Islamic authenticity (see for example, Abaza 2000). Such concern is legitimate, especially when protagonists of Islamisation see Islam as a religious system of thoughts with a clear epistemological delineation and methodological measures of knowledge assessment and validation. Such a conception is reductionist in the sense that it tries to trace the roots of all knowledge back to religion. The danger of this notion is that it has the potential to create a serious methodological shortcoming that would further eclipse Islamic epistemology. Moten argues that the soundness of Islam-centred epistemology rests on an intellectual openness that perceives Islam as a civilisation containing philosophies, religious thoughts, various forms of knowledge, and intellectual traditions. This totality "looks upon life as an organic whole and approaches its problems in the light" of societal values and ontological realities (Moten 1990: 163) and has an ability to draw from multiple sources and different, perhaps even contradictory, forms of knowledge in its construction of nascent epistemology.

Nasr argues that the Islamisation of knowledge project "has been shaped more in the spirit of political discourse" than by a constructive and reflexive academic dialogue (Nasr 1991: 387). This statement causes the Islamisation of knowledge policy and practice to resonate in a country like the Sudan where Islamisation was a state-sponsored project during the Islamist reign from 1989 until 2019. This is also applicable to a country like Malaysia, which is witnessing educational reconfiguration and the (re)construction of a new

state discourse on science and Islam. In Malaysia, protagonists Islamise state institutions, including academic ones, and enhance new bureaucratic elites who share a common Islam-informed ideology. Abaza states that the Islamisation of knowledge debate in Malaysia is at the centre of political power because protagonists of this epistemic paradigm occupy influential positions in academic institutions, publishing, and governmental offices (Abaza 2000: 62). In secular-oriented countries such as Egypt, however, the promotion of the Islamisation of knowledge occurs via political activism in which Islamic groups, organisations, and individuals play a dynamic role in negotiating the nascent epistemology project through society. Thus, the policy and practice of the Islamisation of knowledge on the ground differ from one society to another depending on socio-political contexts and prevailing educational circumstances. However, asymmetry in power relations between the West and the Global South and its hegemonic impact on educational policy are significant factors in the instigation of the Islamisation of knowledge discourse.

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