

Weiss Holger, 2003.

Obligatory Almsgiving: An Inquiry Into Zakāt In The Pre-Colonial Bilād Al-Sūdān. *Studia Orientalia*, vol. 96. Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society. vi + 320 pp. €30. ISBN 951-9380-56-6.

Reviewed by Kalle Gustafsson
University of Helsinki, Finland

Zakāt is the third of the five pillars of Islam. In the Islamic notion of political economy, alms (*zakāt* but also alternatively *ṣadaqa* in the Qur’ān) were to be collected and distributed by the head of the community of believers. Muslim states had other sources of revenue as well, of which Qur’ān mentions two: poll-tax (*jizya*) was paid by the non-Muslims, and war booty (*ghanīma*) was obtained in a jihād. In Africa, Muslim rulers tried to introduce Islamic taxation in several cases, but only a few of these attempts lasted for a longer period. Generally, the history of *zakāt* is a very under-researched topic. As John Hunwick has pointed out, historically we know very little about how it was assessed, gathered, or distributed in Africa.¹

In *Obligatory Almsgiving*, Holger Weiss tries to fill this gap in research. Thematically, his book dwells on the subject of social welfare in Muslim societies that was also dealt with in an earlier volume edited by Weiss.² As Weiss explains in the preface, *Obligatory Almsgiving* originated as an attempt to place the introduction of *zakāt* as a tax in the Sokoto Caliphate into a larger context. In this book, the author employs a hefty selection of archival materials and published works to present a synthesis of the importance of *zakāt* in precolonial Sub-Saharan Africa. Although the subtitle refers to the Sudanic Africa, the author also discusses the Almoravid movement and Samori’s first empire, which strictly defined fall outside the geographical scope of the book. However, their inclusion is well grounded, because they offer important examples on the implementation of *zakāt* in Muslim Africa. They also serve as good reminders of how religious ideas spread through North and West Africa.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first two chapters serve as an introductory discussion. In the first chapter, Weiss points to the important dichotomy between public and private sphere, which is used in the book as a tentative division. In Weiss’ interpretation, the role of the state is of key

¹ Hunwick, John 1999: “Islamic Financial Institutions: Theoretical Structures and Aspects of Their Application in Sub-Saharan Africa,” in Stiansen & Guyer (editors): *Credit, Currencies and Culture: African Financial Institutions in Historical Perspective*, pp. 72-99. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

² Weiss, Holger (editor) 2002: *Social Welfare in Muslim Societies in Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. To this collection, Weiss contributed two articles: “Zakāt and the Question of Social Welfare: An Introductory Essay on Islamic Economics and Its Implications for Social Welfare” (pp. 7-38), and “The Concept of Islamic Economy as Articulated in Sokoto: Social Justice and State Responsibility” (pp. 162-186).

importance. The question that must be asked in assessing the history of *zakāt* centres on the role of an Islamic state in its collection and distribution. In other words, Weiss deems it important to emphasize the question whether *zakāt* becomes part of the public sphere or not. According to Weiss, *zakāt* as a tax was not implemented by most Muslim states in Sudanic Africa. However, the states that were established as the outcome of victorious Islamic reform movements were exceptional, because they consciously tried to establish an Islamic economy. Weiss names four cases of such Islamic states: the Almoravids, the Sokoto Caliphate, the Mahdīya in the Sudan as well as the *Diina* in Masina. Already in the first chapter, however, Weiss points out that one of the biggest problems in analysing the impact of *zakāt* in the precolonial Bilād al-Sūdān is the lack of documentation. This must be kept in mind when evaluating Weiss' conclusions.

The second chapter of *Obligatory Almsgiving* offers a comprehensive presentation of *zakāt*, including its definition and background as well as a discussion of the meanings of *zakāt* as outlined in the Qur'ān. Weiss also discusses Islamic ethics in connection to taxation. He underlines the fact that there is an obvious rift between ideal and reality in Muslim countries. By examining the precolonial Muslim communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, Weiss brings into light the discrepancies between the ideal and implementation of *zakāt*. Thus, *Obligatory Almsgiving* is, in a way, an inquiry into the theory and practice of *zakāt*.

Chapters three and four deal with a wide variety of Muslim states in precolonial Africa. In assessing the early attempts to introduce *zakāt* (third chapter), Weiss relies mainly on the *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*.³ Although the other four pillars of Islam are easy to identify in the historical sources, it is more difficult to detect *zakāt* in them. Thus, Weiss can only point to a lack of any information on *zakāt* in Takrūr, Mālī, and Muslim Ghāna. In Songhay, there was at least an attempt to introduce a solid Islamic order, but as Weiss shows, *zakāt* as a tax was never implemented throughout the whole empire. Importantly, Weiss also discusses Nāṣir al-Dīn's attempt to impose *zakāt* during the seventeenth century. Nāṣir al-Dīn was among the first Muslim reformers in Sub-Saharan Africa to raise the question of *zakāt* and combine it with the establishment of a new political order. Weiss continues his journey through time and space in the fourth chapter by moving between Senegambia – “lack of references to *zakāt*” – and the eastern part of the Bilād al-Sūdān, where a mixture of Sudanic traditions and Islamic ideals were commonly practised. In his critical treatment of the history of the *Diina* of Masina, Weiss notes that although it came closest to a “pure” Islamic state, the collection and distribution of *zakāt* was still poorly supervised. Instead, the foundations of the *Diina* were based on a war economy. Generally Weiss concludes that, in the case of the levy of *zakāt*, the ideals and the realities did not usually meet.

³ Edited by N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Second edition in Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000.

Further attempts to introduce *zakāt* as a tax were made during the nineteenth century in the Sokoto Caliphate and by the Mahdiyya in the Sudan. These two cases are dealt with in chapters five and six, respectively. The chapter on Sokoto Caliphate leans heavily on archival material collected by the author himself in Nigeria. In it, Weiss challenges the argument that there was a state-controlled “social welfare system” in the Sokoto Caliphate during the nineteenth-century. This interpretation was presented by Michael Watts in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but according to Weiss, the major problem with Watts’ argument is the lack of solid information about taxation in the Sokoto Caliphate. Weiss argues that, for the founders of the Caliphate, responsibility to care for the social needs of the people came only second after the first and foremost responsibility to defend the state and the *Pax Islamica*. In the Sokoto Caliphate, *zakāt* was misused in ways that gave rise to criticism. For example, the major burden of taxation fell upon the *talakawa*, the agricultural population, while many members of the title holding upper class were exempted. Another major weakness was that the levy of *zakāt* was limited to agricultural produce, whereas merchants and those engaged in crafts and trade escaped the payment of *zakāt*. Still, as Weiss is able to confirm, *zakāt* was part of the public life in the Sokoto Caliphate – it just could not form the basis of the “social welfare system” as advocated by Watts.

Almsgiving, however, did not depend on having an Islamic state. Chapter seven of *Obligatory Almsgiving* states that almsgiving existed also without the establishment of an Islamic economy. Weiss, following John Hunwick, argues that *zakāt*, instead of constituting a so-called “social welfare system”, was a central part of a “moral economy of salvation”. According to Weiss (p. 239), “what mattered was the private act and what was to become the cornerstone of Muslim charity in sub-Saharan Africa was not institutional but private charity, namely *ṣadaqa*.” Thus, Weiss points to *zakāt* in the private sphere and how Muslim communities dealt with the almsgiving of everyday life in non-Muslim societies. For this assessment, there exists a variety of sources, e.g. proverbs, praise-songs and sermons, to provide a basis for a qualitative observation, although quantitative sources are lacking. Thus, Weiss offers an interpretation according to which the application of the third pillar of Islam in everyday life was based on voluntary almsgiving. In the concluding chapter, Weiss reflects on his rather critical interpretation of *zakāt* as the basis of a social security network, and puts forward a question whether *zakāt* was all a chimera. Instead, Weiss has found ample evidence that *zakāt* existed in the precolonial Bilād al-Sūdān, where the Islamic order was first and foremost a communal one.

The scope of *Obligatory Almsgiving* is wide-ranging, and it is the first serious attempt to present an outline of the ideals and the realities of *zakāt* in the precolonial sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, Weiss’ book serves scholars who are interested in the economic history of the Sudanic Africa. I recommend it highly to readers who want to increase their knowledge about the history of Islam in Africa, although the book is not intended to serve as an introduction to Islam in Africa from a historical perspective. For the comparative views it offers, the

book is mandatory reading for those who are generally interested in Islamic law and economics. *Obligatory Almsgiving* is well conceived and organised, thoroughly researched, and very well written. Those who read the book will be rewarded with an outstanding interpretation of a complex subject.