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RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND MODES OF COEXISTENCE IN URBAN WEST AFRICA

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Religious Diversity through the Life Trajectories of Northern Migrants in Madina, Accra

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Abstract:

In this paper, I explore the interrelatedness of individual migration and religious conversion stories, both temporal and permanent. Through two contrastive case studies, I analyze the role of migration in religious diversity among Christians, Muslims, and practitioners of African Religious Traditions in Accra's urban settings. I illustrate how the life trajectories of Aisha and Solomon provide some critical and insightful perspectives on how migration and urban settings intersect in shaping individual social actors' lived religious experiences in a multi-religious field and help them navigate between different familial and societal demands, as well as how individuals' upbringings can impact religious diversity.

Keywords: religious diversity, northern migrants, Madina, Accra, Ghana

Résumé:

Dans cet article, j'explore l'interdépendance des histoires individuelles de migration et de conversion religieuse, à la fois temporelles et permanentes. À travers deux études de cas contrastives, j'analyse le rôle de la migration dans la diversité religieuse parmi les chrétiens, les musulmans et les adeptes des traditions religieuses africaines dans les milieux urbains d'Accra. Je montre comment les trajectoires de vie d'Aisha et de Solomon offrent des perspectives critiques et perspicaces sur la façon dont la migration et les environnements urbains se croisent pour façonner les expériences religieuses vécues par les acteurs sociaux individuels dans un domaine multireligieux, les aider à naviguer entre les différentes exigences familiales et sociétales, ainsi que sur la façon dont l'éducation des individus peut avoir un impact sur la diversité religieuse.

Mots-clés: diversité religieuse, migrants du nord, Madina, Accra, Ghana

As in other cities in West Africa, religious diversity in Accra has been continuously shaped and negotiated by migrants' presence in the urban space (Osella and Soares 2020; De Witte 2008). The concrete space referred to in this article is Madina, a suburb in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Over the years, Madina has witnessed an influx of rural-urban migration (Zaami 2010). Madina is the capital of the La-Nkwantanang Madina municipality and has become the hub for major commercial activities (Ghana Statistical Service 2010). Madina Zongo has also become one of the migrant communities in Accra and is home to most northern migrants engaging in seasonal migration (Zaami 2020). *Zongo* refers to settlements within West African towns that are predominantly inhabited by migrants. The community is characterized by the use of the Hausa language as a lingua franca and the practice of Islam as the shared religion. In modern Ghana, *zongo* communities serve as a melting pot of individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds, including those from both northern and southern Ghana, as well as immigrants from neighbouring countries (Pontzen 2021). In this working paper, I present two contrastive



case studies to illustrate how northern migrants in Madina are embodying religious diversity through their life trajectories. Thereby I expand the focus of my previous work on this migrant population, which analysed the gendered dynamics of migrants' livelihood strategies, and explore the interrelatedness of individual migration and (temporal) religious conversion stories with two exemplary cases. The paper thus addresses the issue of how migration and mobility interplay with religious diversity in urban contexts, and it raises the question of religious minorities and majorities. Most importantly, however, it demonstrates that while religious diversity is often understood by distinguishing between Christians, Muslims and African Traditional Religions, or by exploring the diversity within them, it is equally important to explore how individual social actors live this diversity, navigate between different religious practices, and sometimes embrace two religions at the same time. The context of Madina's religious infrastructures plays an important role in how religious diversity is lived and experienced, as these infrastructures shape individual religiosity on an everyday basis (Meyer 2016).

My first case study focuses on Aisha, who migrated to Madina after a broken marriage in search of a better life. Her life trajectory shows that her individual religiosity has become diverse, although she came from a conservative Muslim family. The second case is about Solomon, who was born into a family practicing both traditional religion and Christianity but raising him as a traditionalist. However, arriving in Accra, though from a plural religious background, he increasingly rejects religious diversity. The two case studies present perspectives on individual religious journeys that can contribute to the understanding of religious diversity in Accra's urban settings.

Case study 1: Aisha's migration trajectory

Aisha is a Muslim migrant from the northern region and embarked on her journey to Madina in April 2021 after her marriage dissolved because her husband failed to provide for her needs in the household. In addition to her needs, Aisha wanted to continue with her education after marriage but the husband was not in agreement with her dream. Yet, her parents insisted she remain in the matrimonial home and be submissive. In my interview with her, she highlighted that the Qu'ran teaches women should be submissive to their husbands – yet she disagrees with this because she believes that submissiveness must be reciprocal between husband and wife. Initially, Aisha followed her father's advice and returned to her husband's house but when she realized that her husband could still not provide for her wellbeing, she decided to migrate to Madina.

Although she came from a conservative Muslim family in northern Ghana, she had been exposed to religious diversity during her high school years. She narrated her experience in a boarding senior high school with her school mother, who was a Christian and had introduced her to church. Aisha had enjoyed attending the school church with her school mother, but



when she returned home during holidays, she practiced her religion as a Muslim. Even though she has not converted to Christianity, this encounter has continued to shape her life, as I will discuss later.

Lived religion in Madina

Upon arrival in Madina, Aisha continued practicing her religion as a Muslim by observing the five daily prayers except when she was in her menstrual cycle. She prayed in two mosques; one was closer to Madina's market, the space in which she worked, and another mosque was closer to where she lived. The elements of urban infrastructure that play a key role in how most migrants live their religion in Madina are the mosques and the market; the closeness of these infrastructures allows them to work and to pray regularly (Knott, Krech, and Meyer 2016). The mosque closer to where Aisha lives was constructed to meet the needs of the migrant community, while the one closer to the market is to serve the needs of the traders and workers within which the market is situated.

Madina started as a predominantly Muslim settlement like any other *zongo*. However, as the surrounding areas of the Madina Zongo grew, people of various faiths were attracted to the place. Thus, while the Madina Zongo, located directly opposite the main Madina market, remains mainly Muslim quarters, the other parts that fall within its radius are more diverse. The market itself is also diverse, with people of different nationalities, religions and ethnic backgrounds coming for various economic transactions. This characterises the market as a cosmopolitan space where encounters between people with different religious identities take place. According to Aisha, who is a *kaya yoo* (head porter), the majority of her customers are Christians. Because of her background and her experience with both Islam and Christianity, her relationships with some of them went beyond business transactions. Beyond the economic aspect, she also established social ties with some of her customers, an experience that allows her to be flexible in her religious encounters with others in Madina.

Aisha thus became acquainted with a customer who has regularly picked her up to go to church. Aisha decided to become flexible and embrace both Christianity and Islam. First, it began with her customer inviting her to the opening of a new church, where she was impressed by the performances of choristers in administering songs and Bible readings. Aisha's second and third visits to the church, still on the invitation of her customer, excited her even more. In addition to the spiritual services offered by the church, food and drinks were also served. The quality of the food was something Aisha could rarely afford with her meagre income and the conspicuous choristers' display, which Meyer (2013; 2020) refers to as aesthetics of material religion, were among the things that attracted Aisha to church. However, despite Aisha's excitement about going to church on Sundays, she initially stopped attending church services for three weeks, then resumed, and finally stopped completely, because she realized that she



could not practice her daily Muslim prayers on Sundays. Her individual religious practice suffered when she tried to combine it with Christian service. “One cannot use two eyes to look into a bottle,” she said when she explained her decision to stop going to church and focus on one religion, yet without losing her admiration for Christianity. Her ambivalence regarding religious practices has continued to show up in her everyday interactions with her customers.

Aisha represents not merely an example of a cosmopolitan Muslim living in Madina; she embodies Madina’s religious diversity. Despite being a devout Muslim and having attended church services in the past, she maintains a warm relationship with all her Christian and Muslim friends and clients. However, in the long term she rejected combining Islam and Christianity and needed stability with one particular religion. Aisha can be considered as a cosmopolitan Muslim whose religiosity is shaped by a temporal and shifting embodiment of religious diversity. In my interaction with her, I realized that both the Quran and the Bible continue to shape her religious views.

Religious diversity beyond the individual

Aisha begins her daily work at 4 am and closes at 6 pm. While at work in Madina market, she can observe her five daily prayers by asking her customers’ permission to go inside the nearby mosque and pray before she continues to work for them. She explained that the Muslim prayers usually have a shorter and a longer version; when she is at work, she observes the shorter versions of prayers, which take under three minutes. Aisha’s Christian customers are mostly tolerant enough to allow her to pray while she works for them and she is able to negotiate how long she keeps them waiting. According to her, the way she is combining work and prayers is in the interest of herself and the customer, and this, according to her, is understood by Allah. In this sense, her practice of religious diversity goes beyond herself as an individual and includes her Christian customers – together, they are building some form of mutual trust and respect. This process of trust-building is also connected to the broader environment, reflecting the cultural and social heterogeneity of Madina. It reflects the practices of tolerance and diversity that are specific to the Madina market space, whether embodied by customers, market women/ men, or migrants. Such everyday practices of trust-building between Muslim and Christian traders in the Madina market can be observed in many of Aisha’s daily routines. A Christian migrant from the Ashanti region, for example, allows Aisha to sit under her ‘stall’ when she has no load to carry. She also trusts Aisha with her goods when she has errands to run.

The decisive role of concrete urban spaces and the immediate socio-cultural environment in promoting religious diversity became evident when Aisha mentioned that when she returns to her hometown in the northern region, she will not be able to express her interest in religions other than Islam. In addition to coming from a conservative Muslim family, her brother



is an Imam of the mosque attached to their family house. They would not tolerate her practicing two religions. Nevertheless, while living in Madina, although she still considers herself as a Muslim, she can become flexible enough to combine Islam with Christianity – at least for a while.

Case study 2: religious diversity through the life trajectory of Solomon, born as a follower of African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Solomon was born to a religiously plural family. His father practiced African Traditional Religion (ATR) and his mother was a Christian. He was brought up as a traditionalist because of his father's dominant influence in the family. Solomon's parents illustrate a case of ambiguous religious diversity marked by elements of tolerance and intolerance. Their relationship showed tolerance because Solomon's parents belonged to different religions yet they respected each other's choices. However, Solomon mentioned that he always longed to be a Christian – the religion of his mother – but could not follow his mother to church because his dad controlled the household in an authoritative patriarchal manner by insisting that he follow his religion.

Solomon's migration to Madina and conversion to Christianity

Solomon came as a seasonal migrant to Madina in January 2010, and he has been returning to his village regularly. His conversion from African Traditional Religion to Christianity occurred in Madina in 2010 when Solomon attended an Easter congregation organized by the God Kingdom Church. Two of his sisters who were Christians invited him to attend the Easter celebration. The preaching was about the death and resurrection of Christ. After the sermon, the pastor called on those who wanted to convert and give their life to Christ. Solomon said he wanted to follow this call and step out but feared the crowd. The sister sitting next to him encouraged him to go forward and give his life to Christ, so he "took a bold step" and went forward to the altar for the ritual of conversion. According to him, his conversion was influenced by the sermon about the death and resurrection of Christ. In this regard, the material process of Easter, the church, the people and bodily performances played a role in his conversion (Knott, Krech, and Meyer 2016; Parmenter 2013).

Solomon is a sportsman who played football on Sundays. The Sunday after his conversion, he forgot that he was supposed to be at church and instead suited up to play football. On his way, he met his sister, who was on her way to church and asked him to go back home and change and come to church. Clearly, Solomon did not know that he needed to attend church service every Sunday after his conversion. With the help of his sister, he managed to change his routine to attend church service on Sundays and play football on Saturdays. Solomon's conversion was inspirational; however, the sisters helped him to sustain his Christianity.



Solomon's lived religion in Madina

Solomon came to Madina as a truck pusher at the market. After his conversion, in addition to Sunday services, he also dedicates Tuesday, Friday and Saturday evenings for prayer and Bible study and in 2021 he became a church deacon. In the interview, Solomon narrated how his life has been transformed since his conversion to Christianity. He mentioned how God communicates with him through dreams. He gave an instance of how God told him to relocate from Madina Zongo junction, a predominantly Muslim community, to a more diverse location. He recounted the misfortunes that had befallen him while living at Madina Zongo junction, where his personal belongings were frequently stolen and where he had rarely earned enough money to survive the next day. According to him, his relocation brought him success in his work. Aside from his personal earnings, he also receives financial support from the church, which enables him to pay his brother's hospital bills.

Solomon's conversion story informs us about Madina's diversity, while his narration also illustrates how the church constitutes an infrastructure that provides Solomon with a pathway towards a better life (Meyer 2013). On this journey, however, his worldview about religious diversity changed. He was now describing followers of other religions as 'unbelievers' and 'idol worshippers'. When he used these terms, he was referring to his father's religion and to Islam. In fact, his relocation from Madina Zongo junction to Adenta was influenced by his own religious beliefs and his attitude towards religious 'others'. His spiritual interpretations of his missing personal item stories indicate why he decided not to co-exist with these 'others'.

Conclusion

The life trajectories of Aisha and Solomon, both migrants from the northern region of Ghana, constitute two contrastive case studies that provide deep insights into the spatial and temporal dynamics of religious diversity in Madina, Accra. In their narratives, these two migrants described how the way they have lived their religions is entangled with their upbringings, work routines, and livelihoods. Their stories highlight the strong effect of material components of religious practice, be it in terms of food or financial support in case of physical health problems, where medical insurance is missing. They also indicate the important aspect of trust-building among members of diverse religious communities, as well as the reverse effect: how suspicion against religious 'others' leads to segregation. Both cases show how Madina has provided them with a social space to discover their multiple and shifting religious identities. In other words, Madina is a space where migrants shape each other's religiosities through their mutual interactions and encounters with others in the market and community. Hence, focusing on individual life trajectories and stories of (temporal) conversion of migrants, who are carving for themselves flexible multiple identities between different religions, can serve as an entry point in studying religious diversity in urban spaces (Verkaaik 2013).



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Biographical Notes

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