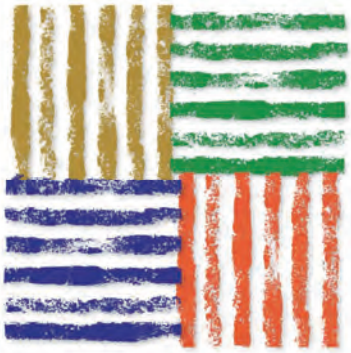

MIASA

Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa

# RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND MODES OF COEXISTENCE IN URBAN WEST AFRICA

Issouf Binaté
Yunus Dumbe
Musa Ibrahim
Nadine Sieveking
Mariama Zaami

MIASA Working Paper No 2023(1)

University of Ghana, Legon
September 2023

MIASA Working Papers 2023(1)

Edited by the
Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA)
Section Editor: Susann Baller

The MIASA Working Paper series serves to disseminate the research results of work in progress prior to publication in order to encourage the exchange of ideas and academic debate. The series aims to publish research findings from the work of the MIASA Interdisciplinary Fellow Groups (IFGs) and other MIASA fellows in an open-access manner. Inclusion of a paper in the MIASA Working Paper Series does not constitute publication and should not limit publication in any other venue. Copyright remains with the authors.

This Working Paper 2023(1) collects the findings of IFG 7 on "Religious Diversity and Modes of Coexistence in Urban West Africa", which was hosted by MIASA from 1 September to 31 December 2022. The IFG 7 was comprised of two conveners, Yunus Dumbe and Mariama Zaami, and three further members, Issouf Binaté, Musa Ibrahim, and Nadine Sieveking. The initial preproposal for the IFG was conceived by Benedikt Pontzen and Yunus Dumbe. This Working Paper was co-edited by Musa Ibrahim and Nadine Sieveking. The research leading to these results has received funding from the Maria Sibylla Merian Centres Programme of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Germany, under grant n° [01 UK2024A], with co-funding from the University of Ghana.



WP Coordination: Agnes Schneider-Musah
All MIASA Working Papers are available online and free of charge on the website:
https://www.ug.edu.gh/mias-africa/miasa-working-papers

Merian Institute for Advances Studies in Africa (MIASA)
P.O. Box LG 1075, Legon, Accra, Ghana
Tel.: 030 290 7319
Email: miasa@ug.edu.gh
Website: https://www.ug.edu.gh/mias-africa/

To cite: Author name, author first name, title of the paper, in: Musa Ibrahim and Nadine Sieveking (eds.), Religious Diversity and Modes of Coexistence in Urban West Africa, Working Paper No 2023(1), pp. X–X, online: hyperlink.

## Table of content

# Religious Diversity in Sharia-Compliant Cities in Northern Nigeria

Musa Ibrahim,
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST)

**Abstract:**
This paper examines religious diversity through everyday life experiences of various religious or not-so-religious groups and how they negotiate cultural and theological differences in the context of the sharia implementation in urban northern Nigeria. More specifically, it analyses how the sharia (implementation of Islamic law) reconfigures inter-faith relations, especially between Muslim and Christian minorities. Initially intended to reinforce strict conservative practices in urban centres, the reform has equally facilitated religious pluralism and hybrid practices such as the invention of Jesus *Mawlid*, which is observed by both Muslims and Christians as well as the blending of religion with previously considered irreligious urban cultures.

Keywords: religious diversity, sharia implementation, interfaith relations, Nigeria

**Résumé:**
Cet article examine la diversité religieuse à travers les expériences de la vie quotidienne de divers groupes religieux ou non-religieux et la manière dont ils négocient les différences culturelles et théologiques dans le contexte de l'application de la charia dans les zones urbaines du nord du Nigéria. Plus précisément, il analyse la manière dont la charia reconfigure les relations interconfessionnelles, en particulier entre les minorités musulmanes et chrétiennes. Initialement destinée à renforcer les pratiques conservatrices strictes dans les centres urbains, la réforme a également facilité le pluralisme religieux et les pratiques hybrides telles que l'invention de Jésus Mawlid, qui est observé à la fois par les musulmans et les chrétiens, ainsi que le mélange de la religion avec des cultures urbaines auparavant considérées comme irréligieuses.

Mots-clés: diversité religieuse, application de la charia, relations interconfessionnelles, Nigeria

This paper discusses religious diversity in the context of sharia regimes in northern Nigeria. I describe everyday life experiences of people from various religious or not-so-religious groups who negotiate cultural and theological differences in the context of the sharia regime in northern Nigeria. More specifically, I analyse how the sharia context (implementation of Islamic law) reconfigures inter-faith relations, especially between Muslim and Christian minorities. Thereby I explain how a reform that was initially intended to reinforce strict conservative religious practices instead facilitated religious pluralism characterized by hybrid religious practices.

Nigeria is an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous country of over 200 million inhabitants. While Christians and Muslims are in nearly equal proportions, there are also practitioners of other religions, such as *Maguzawa* in northern Nigeria. Since the introduction of Islam in the Hausa-phone region between the 11th and 14th centuries, those who practice traditional African religions are commonly referred to as *Maguzawa* (sin: *Bamaguje*). This term originates

from the Arabic word "*majus*" (corrupted to "*magus*") or Zoroastrianism, which is a category in the Quran that allows non-Muslims to maintain their own faith as long as they pay the *jizya* (a religious tax paid by non-Muslims) (Barkow 1973: 62).

Politically, Nigeria is broadly divided between northern and southern regions even though subdivisions exist within each of the regions. The North is predominantly Muslim, and the South is predominantly Christian. In terms of Northern Nigerian religious demography, the vast majority of Muslims are members of the Sunni branch of Islam, which is further subdivided into other categories. The Sunni broader subcategories are Sufis (Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya brotherhoods), Salafis (Izala), and those who do not accept labels. Both Shia Muslims and Christians are minority groups in the predominantly Muslim northern region.

In the early 2000s, some elected governors in Muslim-majority states adopted sharia (the Islamic legal system) as their official legal system (Ostien and Dekker 2010). Since the sharia regimes blend religion and government, this development reinforced the dominance of the Sunni Muslim majority over various minority groups such as Christians, non-Sunni Muslims, and non-religious people (Ibrahim 2022). This dominance became more obvious in urban centres where such diverse groups cohabit. While scholars have extensively studied how religion, particularly the sharia project, has polarized people of different faiths (Harnischfeger 2004; Harris 2013), my focus in this article is on people's everyday life experiences and the diverse ways in which religious subgroups constantly renegotiate living together on a daily basis in those sharia-compliant cities.[10]

In the context of the MIASA IFG 7 framework of understanding religious diversity in urban Africa, I use three case studies in this paper to demonstrate how various groups engage with each other in inter- and intra-religious relations, and how their divergent practices in terms of enforcing or resisting hegemony facilitate religious pluralism within a shared urban space. Thinking infrastructurally (see the thematic introduction of this collection of working papers), the first case presents how contemporary reformers, with the support of the sharia regimes, influence religiosity in urban spaces by reshaping cities' physical infrastructure. The second case presents dynamics of religious diversity involving (non-physical and human) religious infrastructures. The third case analyses how interactions between Muslims and Christian minorities in the context of Muslim majority settings led to the invention of Jesus Mawlid as a practical example of religious pluralism in northern Nigeria. My contribution thus addresses both the issue of religious infrastructures and the question of minority-majority relations.

[10] The phrase sharia-compliant city is an emic term used within the local communities in which I conducted my research. When sharia was first implemented, it was common to see large signboards at the entrance of some cities, like Kano, that read "Kano is a sharia-compliant city. Please take heed".

## Shaping religion and religiosity through physical infrastructure in Sokoto

Sokoto is one of the states in which sharia was adopted and enforced in the early 2000s. Before sharia, the city had two cinemas, the Sokoto Cinema and the Northern Cinema, which showed Western, Asian, and Nigerian films. Established in the decades following independence, both of them became not only symbols of development and entertainment hubs but also major cultural influencers that stimulated other activities around them in the 1970s. Very much in line with Brian Larkin's (2008) description of how infrastructure generates effects far beyond the immediate purpose for which it was created, commercial activities typical in urban centres, such as restaurants, beer parlours, and brothels, developed quickly around the Sokoto Cinema building. Hence, the neighbourhood known as Sokoto Cinema became one of the most populous locations in the city.

Following the adoption of sharia, debates around cinema infrastructure shifted from economic development and education-centred to moral discourse championed by the contemporary sharia reformists in northern Nigeria. For instance, there was a popular discourse among the sharia proponents that cinemas were a major promoter of 'un-Islamic' activities that tainted the city's Islamic image, which was previously the headquarters of the Sokoto caliphate. In this regard, the reformists viewed ending cinema in Sokoto as one way of transforming the city into a sharia-compliant one.

In 2002 the Sokoto government bought Sokoto Cinema for the sum of thirty million naira (at that time, USD 250,000) and converted it to a mosque. The government remodelled the building, adding a minaret section to the existing structure, removing the seats inside the hall, and creating more entrances for the worshippers. The state named this new house of worship Isa Mai Kwari Mosque in memory of the last son born to the nineteenth-century Islamic reformer Usman Dan Fodio, founder of the Sokoto Caliphate. Northern Cinema was converted into a political office before the building was demolished.

Another example is how the contemporary reformers through the state government invested money in erecting small signposts with Arabic inscriptions and sometimes with transliteration carrying expressions such as "lā ilāha illā llāh" (there is no deity but Allah), "Allahu Akbar" (Allah is the greatest), and "hasbuna Allāhu wa nicamal wakīlu" (sufficient for us is Allah, and [He is] the best disposer of affairs) (see Fig 1).


*Figure 3: A religious signpost in Sokoto. Photo credit: Musa Ibrahim*

This form of infrastructural transformation from profane to sacred is what some people within and outside the government use as visual persuasion that Sokoto is physically reformed into a sharia-compliant city. The conversion of the cinema into a mosque and the erected signs with religious inscriptions are part of religious infrastructure not only architecturally; they enable or prevent certain activities and in turn, shape individuals and groups' experiences of urban life. People born since the beginning of the contemporary Islamic reform, who are now over twenty years old, have never known, let alone experienced, city conviviality through a conventional cinema, unless they have lived outside the sharia-compliant states. Indeed, the only thing that has resisted these transformations is the very name of the neighbourhood, which has remained "Sokoto Cinema" nearly two decades after the cinema's closure. In the same vein, as Timothy Mitchell's (1994; 2005) notion of sensory modality suggests, the Arabic calligraphy on the signs and their placement at strategic public locations invites those passing by to cultivate certain forms of religious subjectivities. Becoming part of people's everyday life, the texts generate a mixed media experience of seeing, reading, and performing. The act of seeing these symbols is usually followed by reciting the texts written on them as daily *azkar* (pl. of *zikr*, Arabic: remembrance of Allah) and *du'a* (prayer or supplication). Reading such texts is a devotional act, which conforms to central claims of the sharia-compliant discourse and has a significant spiritual impact on the life of Muslims involved.

By allowing or denying the presence of certain infrastructure, these examples show how contemporary Muslim reformers are using physical infrastructure for influencing or enforcing specific forms of religiosity among urban populations.

## Religious diversity and non-physical human infrastructure in Kano

The second case involves urban subcultures and religious worldmaking observed in Kano. After forming a government, the sharia reformists established *yan hisbah* (sharia police) as part of the religious (security) infrastructure in the city. The *yan hisbah* surveil public spaces and enforce moral codes, such as 'proper' dressing and gender separation in public transportation, as well as censoring youth cultures they consider 'un-Islamic'.

In Kano, one finds urban subgroups associated with specific urban cultures. An example of this is *yan birni* (also known as *yan gayu*), a category of cosmopolitan youth influenced by globalised popular cultures, especially American hip-hop artists. Some of these youth appear in public with plaited, dreadlocked, or punk hairstyles and sometimes wear chains/necklaces, and earrings. They constitute a counter-public in the context of the imagined morally consolidated urban public that the sharia reform project is working to establish in the city. Most of these *yan birni* are Sunni Muslims, which makes them part of the religious majority. However, they are culturally a minority who do not conform to the social norms in their environment. The sharia police frequently arrest these youths and publicly shame them by forcefully shaving their hairstyles and changing their clothing.

In this sharia enforcement that created tension between the *yan birni* and the *yan hisbah*, groups of Shia Muslims intervened. They allowed them to participate in their own public religious events, including during the *mawlid* and Ashura processions, with all sorts of hairstyles and wearing ripped baggy jeans and assorted jewellery (see Fig 2). Thereby they embraced those marginalized young Sunni Muslims by giving them a sense of belonging: They can be Muslims and appear the way they want.


*Figure 4: Shia-Muslims and yan birni (cosmopolitan youth) during a religious procession. Photo credit: Suleiman*

As Hoelzchen and Kirby (2020: 7) point out, religious infrastructure facilitates "the act of living" – a capacity to inhabit certain modes of (collective) existence and action that constitute an endeavour to simultaneously survive and live meaningfully amidst conditions of marginality. While this collaboration between Shias and *yan birni* is staged to counter Sunni sharia reformers' hegemony, it is also tied to the notion of majority-minority politics in the region. Both groups are minority Muslims who feel marginalized in the sharia project. In other words, their alliance shows intra-religious pluralism, and it challenges the sharia reformers' dominance over or control of public religiosity. Without the Shias providing a convivial religious space, this group of urban cosmopolitan youth may not have been able to overcome the sharia police and live the way they wanted.

As these examples provide us with ways to think about Muslim multiculturalism, pluralism, and urban diversity, they also help us to consider transnational Muslim networks as religious infrastructure. On the one hand, pro-sharia activists in Nigeria are mostly Sunnis, with most of those holding leadership roles being part of transnationally connected Salafi movements. They have a strong tie to Saudi Arabia and claim credit for the contemporary iteration of *ummah* in Nigeria through sharia implementation (Ben Amara 2014), even though Sufis were also involved. On the other hand, there are also Iran-funded Shia movements, striving to assert their influence in Nigerian cities.

## Religious pluralism, Muslim-Christian minorities, and the invention of "Jesus *Mawlid*"

The quest for religious pluralism amidst intra- and inter-faith politics facilitated unusual collaborations between minority religious groups in northern Nigeria. One example was how, in the mid-2010s, Shia Muslims and Christians invented hybrid religious practices that deviate from the Sunni majority norms. It was the Shia who invited Christians to join them in their invented "Jesus *Mawlid*" (Jesus' Birthday), which they annually perform, albeit differently from the conventional Christmas (in both beliefs and practices).

The idea of "Jesus *Mawlid*" is based on Shia understanding of the Quran 2:285 that Muslims must believe in all prophets sent by Allah and are mandated not to discriminate against any. Therefore, since they celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, they also feel obliged to celebrate other prophets, especially those known as *ulul-'azm* (the resolute ones), mentioned in the Quran 46:35 and some hadiths (prophetic traditions). Among the *ulul-'azm* mentioned in the Qur'an is Jesus. Furthermore, in Shia theology, there is a strong connection through *wilaya* (authority) between *ulul' azm* prophets and the twelve Shia Imams. They believe in a hadith in which the Shia Imams are introduced as inheritors of the knowledge, miracles, and virtues of the *ulul' azm* prophets. It was in this context that they invented "Jesus

*Mawlid*". It is worth pointing out here that they are using code-switching when naming the event. In Hausa, they call it "*Maulidin Annabi Isa*". However, since they also speak in English, and to give the event an Islamic aura, they self-translated it to "Jesus *Mawlid*" instead of Jesus' birthday or Christmas.

"Jesus *Mawlid*" constitutes an event during which a group of Shia Muslims invite Christians inside a hall decorated with assorted ribbons, balloons, and lighting. On the walls, they hang pictures of Jesus and their leader Shaykh Ibrahim el-Zakzaky. They deliver sermons in turns. When Shias talk about Jesus from Muslims' viewpoints, Christians speak about him from the biblical perspective. Through these performances the two groups have reconfigured themselves from minorities from separate religions into an interfaith minority group. Their invention, "*Jesus Mawlid*", serves as an exceptional forum of religious pluralism that has been historically uncommon in the region.

## Conclusion

The case studies presented in this paper demonstrate instances of the formation of a religiously diverse urban space even in a situation where the government is neither in favour of religious diversity nor religiously neutral. In other words, these examples highlighted how diversity has been contested and that ensuring religious diversity in urban centres is not a neutral political project. It involves a great deal of political and cultural struggles, creative meaning-makings, and manifold power relations between various religious groups. This includes using infrastructure (physical and non-physical, including humans) as enablers and disablers of performances of everyday religiosity and religious experiences. However, the religiously contested playing ground created by sharia implementation not only shapes how dominant groups and various minority groups relate to each other but also facilitates their reconfiguration in ways that promote religious pluralism.

## References

Barkow, Jerome H. (1973), Muslims and Maguzawa in North Central State, Nigeria: An Ethnographic Comparison, in: *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 7, 1, pp. 59–76.

Ben Amara, Ramzi (2014), 'We Introduced Sharīʿa': The Izala Movement in Nigeria as Initiator of sharīʿa-reimplementation in the North of the Country: Some Reflections, in: John A. Chesworth and Franz Kogelmann (eds.), *Sharīʿa in Africa Today: Reactions and Responses*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 125–145.

Fredericks, Rosalind (2018), *Garbage Citizenship: Vital Infrastructures of Labor in Dakar, Senegal*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Harnischfeger, Johannes (2004), Sharia and Control Over Territory: Conflicts Between 'Settlers' and 'Indigenes' in Nigeria, in: *African Affairs*, 412, pp. 431–452.

Harris, Colette (2013), Violence in a Religiously Divided City: Kaduna, Nigeria – From the Shari'a Riots of 2000 to the Post-Election Clashes of 2011, in: *Space and Polity*, 3, pp. 284–299.

Hoelzchen, Yenti and Benjamin Kirby (2020), Introduction: Conceptualising Religious Infrastructures, in: *Conceptualising Religious Infrastructures*, Conference Frobenius Institute, Goethe University Frankfurt, 24 September.

Ibrahim, Musa (2022), Sunni, Shia-Muslims, and Christian Encounters in Nigeria, in: *Africa*, 92, 5, pp. 678–698.

Larkin, Brian (2008), *Signal and Noise*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Mitchell, William J. T. (1994), *Picture Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mitchell, William J. T. (2005), There Are No Visual Media, in: *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4, 2, pp. 257–66.

Ostien, Philip and Albert Dekker (2010), Sharia and National Law in Nigeria, in: Jan Michiel Otto (ed.), *Sharia Incorporated: A Comparative Overview of the Legal Systems of Twelve Muslim Countries in Past and Present*, Leiden: University Press, pp. 553–612.

Simone, Abdou Maliq (2004), People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg, in: *Public Culture*, 16, 3, pp. 407–429.

# Biographical Notes

**Issouf Binaté** is a research scholar at Université Alassane Ouattara (Côte d'Ivoire). His research interests focus on Arab-Islamic education, the revival of Sufi Islam, Islamic NGOs (including Turkish and Arab World organizations) and Islamic Online Studies in Côte d'Ivoire. After a post-doctoral position at the University of Florida (US) in 2022, he is currently Associate Director of the Contemporary Islam Chair in West Africa (UQAM, Canada) and fellow of the Pilot African Postgraduate Academy (Point Sud, Bamako). From September to December 2022, he was MIASA fellow and member of IFG 7.

**Yunus Dumbe** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. In 2009, he completed his PhD in the Study of Religion at the University of Ghana. He was awarded postdoctoral fellowships at the Södertörn University, Stockholm, and the Centre for Contemporary Islam, University of Cape Town. From September to December 2022, he was co-convener of IFG 7 at MIASA. His research focuses on Islamic movements in sub-Saharan Africa, and more specifically in Islamic reform and Islamic radicalization in West Africa.

**Musa Ibrahim** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Cultural and African Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. He is also an Associate Fellow of the African Research Institute for Religion, Ethics, and Society at the University of Cape Town. He was a Postdoctoral Fellow for the Henry Luce Foundation's Initiative on Religion in International Affairs at the University of Florida between 2019 and 2021. In 2022, Dr. Ibrahim was a MIASA fellow in Accra. His research focuses on religion, media, popular culture, ethics, and moral economy. He earned his PhD from the University of Bayreuth, Germany.

**Nadine Sieveking** is an anthropologist with research experience based on fieldwork in Germany and West Africa, covering various domains of embodied social practice and gendered dynamics that have emerged from translocal and transnational entanglements. She has particularly focused on dance practices as transcultural phenomena, and on religiosities in Muslim contexts. She earned her PhD from the Free University of Berlin, and has worked as a lecturer and a senior researcher at the Universities of Bielefeld, Leipzig and Göttingen. In 2022, she was a MIASA fellow at the University of Ghana.

**Mariama Zaami** is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Geography and Resource Development and an Interfaculty member of the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS), University of Ghana. After her Master at the University of Bergen, Norway, she completed her PhD in Sociology at University of Calgary, Canada, in 2017. Her research focuses on the gendered migration patterns from rural to urban locations and the implications of these movements for household livelihoods and religious diversity in Ghana. From September to December 2022, she was co-convener of IFG 7 at MIASA.