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# RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND MODES OF COEXISTENCE IN URBAN WEST AFRICA

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## Turkey and Côte d'Ivoire Encounter: Dynamics, Actors, and Practices in the Field of Islam

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### **Abstract**

This text focuses on Turkey's religious diplomacy in Côte d'Ivoire, a West African country where Islam has experienced significant growth in recent decades. Through the prism of a Soft Power, this cooperation opened Ivorian Islam – dominated by the Maliki and Salafi currents – to the religious tradition of Turkey. This process was marked by the transfers of practices as well as of religious objects, materials for the construction of mosques and support for socio-economic development initiatives. This study is mainly based on fieldwork carried out in Côte d'Ivoire (Abidjan, Bouaké and Korhogo) and Turkey (Istanbul). In addition, a digital ethnography conducted from social networks, in particular Facebook, was used.

Keywords: Ivory Coast, Turkey, Islam, Soft Power, religious infrastructure

### **Résumé**

La présente étude porte sur la diplomatie religieuse de la Turquie en Côte d'Ivoire, un pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest où l'Islam a connu une croissance significative au cours des dernières décennies. À travers le prisme du Soft Power, cette coopération a ouvert l'Islam ivoirien – dominé par les courants malékites et salafistes – à la tradition religieuse de la Turquie. Ce processus a été marqué par des transferts de pratiques mais aussi d'objets religieux, de matériaux pour la construction de mosquées et d'appuis à des initiatives de développement socio-économique. Cette étude repose essentiellement sur un travail de terrain réalisé en Côte d'Ivoire (Abidjan, Bouaké et Korhogo) et en Turquie (Istanbul). Elle s'appuie également sur une ethnographie numérique réalisée à partir des réseaux sociaux, en particulier Facebook.

Mots-clés: Côte d'Ivoire, Turquie, Islam, Soft Power, infrastructures religieuses

Côte d'Ivoire is a West African coastal country known as an important member of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA). Its population is more than 25 million. According to the 2014 official population census, Muslims represented 42%, Christians 34% and other 24%. Starting from a politically marginal position during the colonial period<sup>2</sup> compared to Christianity, which was supported by French administrators, Islam has experienced rapid growth mainly due to the democratization of the political sphere,<sup>3</sup> which allowed an Islamic revival (training, conversion, construction of mosques, etc.) and the immigration of

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<sup>2</sup> Islam represented 10% in 1945 and didn't play an important role in the political field. The first president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, and a large number of his government members were Christians.

<sup>3</sup> Since 1990, the democratization of the political sphere has put an end to the one-party system and contributed to the liberalization of public space. It was an opportunity for Islam to emerge from its marginal situation and open up to secular questions. This period saw the emergence of important Islamic associations (such as the National Islamic Council [CNI]) which would participate in public debates.



populations from countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Senegal.<sup>4</sup> In recent decades, with the support of local Islamic organizations and schools from Arab-Muslim countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, Islam has occupied an increasingly important place in the religious sphere.

With its diplomatic activities towards Africa launched in 1998, Turkey began to take a political and economic interest in Côte d'Ivoire, as well as influencing the Ivoirian religious sphere. Although quite recent, the cooperation between Côte d'Ivoire and Turkey has seen the circulation of socio-economic entrepreneurs and students between these two countries for various purposes. This mobility of people has also led to the introduction of Turkish religious practices through the construction of new places of worship and the implementation of religious training programs in Abidjan and other Ivoirian cities. Based on fieldwork (in Abidjan, Bouaké, Korhogo, and Istanbul) and digital ethnography since 2016, this article analyses the many facets of the Turkish-Ivoirian encounter through the prism of Islam.

This article presents a multi-layered approach to the study of religious diversity in urban Côte d'Ivoire. On a broader scale, it considers the context of transnational mobility and entrepreneurship while focusing, at the same time, on two concrete manifestations of religious infrastructures, i.e., Muslim organizations, which have served as facilitators for Turkish-Ivoirian Muslim encounters, and mosques built in Ivoirian cities with Turkish funding. Moreover, it provides an example of religious diversity and coexistence not only between Muslims, Christians, and others but also within Islam and Muslim encounters in Côte d'Ivoire. In addition, the article sheds light on the complexities of specific configurations of religious minorities in a field dominated by Sunni and Maleki Muslims.

### **Islamic humanitarianism in the context of religious diversity in Côte d'Ivoire**

Islam in Côte d'Ivoire has manifested remarkable growth during the last three decades (Savado 2005; Miran 2006). Although the practice of Islam was limited during the colonial period, its relevance changed over the years following the country's independence. This is observable in several secular areas, particularly in the humanitarian field, where Muslims haven't been active. This welfare-oriented approach is part of a revival of Islam which aims to reconcile religious practices and Muslims' well-being. It relies on a charity marketing strategy mobilizing local actors and sponsors from Arab-Muslim countries around issues of public interest.

Muslims' investment in the humanitarian field in sub-Saharan Africa is prompted by two major factors: one endogenous, linked to the socio-economic crisis caused by the drought in the early 1980s in the Sahel regions, and the other exogenous, related to the oil boom in Arab-Muslim countries. These contexts have led to a surge of pan-Islamic NGOs coming to the aid of

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<sup>4</sup> In Burkina Faso, Muslim populations are around 60% and more than 90% in Mali, Niger and Senegal.



their co-religionists in many African countries (Mattes 1993; Bellion-Jourdain 2001; Rabiātu 2007; Kaag 2008). Based on the values of solidarity advocated by Islam through the institution of Zakat and Sadaqa (Weiss 2000), this mobilisation has taken place in many countries. Not only the populations of African countries with a Muslim majority (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sudan, Chad, etc.), but also countries with Muslim minorities (South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, etc.) have benefited from this aid. In the context of Côte d'Ivoire, it was in the 2000s that the country welcomed the opening of the Saudi Arabian embassy and accepted its membership in institutions such as the Islamic Development Bank, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, etc. (Binaté 2019). Before that, Muslims had to rely only internally on themselves, especially when Cote d'Ivoire experienced a socio-political crisis in the early 2000s.

The peculiarity of Côte d'Ivoire is linked to the evolution of Islam in this country, in particular, to the relations that the postcolonial governments have maintained with Arab-Muslim countries. Indeed, the involvement of these countries in the conflict between Palestine and Israel was decisive in the foreign policy of the government of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the first president of Côte d'Ivoire. Following the Muslim policy of the colonial administration, this president had developed a distrust towards Islam, to the point that he wanted to keep Côte d'Ivoire away from the hotbeds of ideological tensions in the Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East. This initial distrust notwithstanding, relations between Ivoirian Muslims and pan-Islamic organizations have evolved gradually through intermediaries and a series of activities limited to financial support for the construction of mosques and *medersas* (Islamic schools), and the granting of scholarships for students. At the turn of the 1990s, the end of the single-party regime opened the Ivoirian public space to more citizen engagement, with the creation of associations that promoted the establishment of pan-Islamic organizations and institutions. In 1995, the Islamic Development Bank signed a grant agreement to finance an Islamic school in Abidjan. Since 2000, the country has become a member of this institution, as well as of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA). For Turkey, the opening of this new era offered opportunities, after having successfully invested in Central Asia (Balçı 2003; Balçı and Motika 2007) and seeking to extend its sphere of influence in Africa.

### **Côte d'Ivoire and Turkey encounter: contexts and actors**

In the literature addressing the Turkish presence in Africa, few works have focused on the religious dimension of the soft power deployed by Turkey. Gabriella Angey (2009), Toguslu Erkan (2015), and Hamilton Shinn (2015), precursors in this field of research, have focused on the questions of Turkish international policy, the mobility of its social actors, and the economic sectors invested. These fields, which have enabled Turkey to gain social visibility and occupy an important place among the foreign powers present on the continent, have also served as a



framework for analysis by Kristina Dohrn (2013), who worked on Islam as conveyed by the Gülen movement in Tanzanian schools. The links between the ideologies underlying the Gülen teachings and local religious dynamics in Burkinabe and Ivoirian contexts have been analysed by Maud Saint-Lary (2019) and Binaté (2019; 2022).

In fact, Turkey's presence in Côte d'Ivoire is part of a vast project to internationalize the ambitions of this Eurasian country under the heading of "Opening up to Africa". This project has resulted in a series of missions on the continent led by the Turkish government, as well as by businessmen, humanitarians, and religious actors, who all came with the same objective: to make Turkey an important player on the international scene. In most cases, businessmen, humanitarians and religious actors have played pioneering roles with significant interventions in socio-economic areas. They have invested in the fields of construction, transport of industrial products, etc., through many internationally operating companies such as Beko, Dekoset, Inci, Fergen, Kaydan, and Limak Africa.

Being mired in a military and political conflict since 2002, Côte d'Ivoire experienced Turkish soft power through humanitarian assistance and education projects. This concept, developed by Joseph Nye (1990) and adapted in American international relations in the context of the Cold War, is at the heart of Turkish foreign policy. Although economic relations based on exchanges of industrial products already existed between the two countries since the 1990s, the implementation of this policy has extended this bilateral cooperation to other areas, including education, with the opening of the Safak School Group in 2006 and the Centre Ishane for the training and education of young people (CIFEJ). With their social activities linked to Islam, these two establishments have created multiple links and exchange opportunities between Turkish and Ivoirian Muslims.

### **Muslim organizations in Côte d'Ivoire**

The way Islam is organized in Côte d'Ivoire is interesting to analyse. Unlike in Mali or Burkina Faso, where Islam is managed by a federal structure, in Côte d'Ivoire, this religion is not determined by the authority of a clergy but rather shaped by Muslim umbrella organizations represented by the Supreme Council of Imams (COSIM) and the Council of Sunni Imams (CODIS). However, while these organizations serve as interfaces between Muslims and public authorities, they differ in terms of religious ideologies. COSIM is Maliki, while CODIS is Hanbali. Its doctrinal position has brought COSIM closer to Turkey, where the Islamic tradition is dominated by Hanafism, which is less contradictory to Sufi practices.

The Turkish organizations involved in this religious cooperation bear the mark of state institutions – including Diyanet – and private religious foundations, in particular, the Gülen movement and Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Vakfi, respectively responsible for the Safak School Group and the NGO Ishane Association for Development and Education (AIDE). At the Safak School



Group, teaching is focused on the national Ivoirian educational program, with some time dedicated to the Turkish language. For instance, each class had around five hours per week for Turkish learning. The religious component, however, is limited to sharing social values linked to Islam and Turkish culture transmitted by the school staff through their know-how and life skills in terms of forms of everyday sociability, sense of sharing, prohibition of cigarettes and alcohol, etc. This discreet proselytism that characterizes the Gülen movement differs from that supported by Diyanet and developed by the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation, which also owns the CIJEF. In this confessional establishment, Islam (*tawhid, sira, nahw, safu*, etc.), Arabic and Turkish are subjects of the curriculum. This openness to the world of education has brought the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation closer to the Muslim student youth, in particular the Association of Muslim Students and Students of Côte d'Ivoire (AEEMCI), as well as to certain Sufi organizations. Through these relations, the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation has established itself in the Ivoirian Islamic public space (Binaté 2019). In particular, AEEMCI and COSIM played a crucial role in facilitating Turkish influence on Muslim organizations and practices in Côte d'Ivoire.

### **Turkish organizations in the Islamic religious sphere: transfer of religious infrastructures and practices**

Islam in Côte d'Ivoire has presented itself as a moderate religion ("du juste milieu"), largely influenced by a Malekite tradition and supported by the umbrella organization COSIM. The Ivoirian Muslim community opens up to several Islamic currents, including different ways of practicing Turkish Islam. The crossing of diverse religious practices linked to Islam coming from various contexts constitutes what I call the "meeting of Islams" in Côte d'Ivoire.

In this "meeting," Turkey has come to play a major role. In fact, during the visit of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in February 2016 to Côte d'Ivoire, he promised to construct an Islamic complex for COSIM, including the headquarters for this organization and a mosque to be built following the architectural model of places of worship of the Ottomans. This project – which is still awaiting its realization – bears the mark of Turkey's implantation strategy through the material occupation of space by religious infrastructures (Hoelzchen and Kirby 2020). It should also be noted that all the official ceremonies carried out by the Turkish institutions – embassy, Diyanet, NGOs or foundations – take place in spaces decorated with the emblems of the country: the flag of Turkey, posters of the institutions involved, religious messages from Turkish sheikhs, etc. On the occasion of festivities at the Safak School Group in 2006, the national anthem of Turkey and artistic performances (sketches) were presented by students in the Turkish language. Experienced since the opening of this school, this strategy of visibly marking space has been carried over to the religious field.



The meeting of Turkish and Ivoirian Muslims was accompanied by transfers of religious infrastructures and religious practices. This observation is not new insofar as Muslims have maintained religious cooperation with Arab-Muslim countries in similar ways, as can be exemplified by the funding of many mosques both in Abidjan and in other cities of the country. While Turkey has continued this tradition of supporting building infrastructural projects, what is different in the Turkish case is that the works bear visible marks of the donors in terms of the physical aspects of the infrastructures. For example, the mosques offered to the Muslim communities of Adjamé and Yopougon were not only built according to Turkish architecture, but their interiors were decorated with equipment (carpet, clock, etc.) imported from Turkey.

This logic of transferring materials has been transposed into the practices and aesthetics of worship, which is reflected in the layout of the interior space of the mosques: The *mimbars* (pulpits) are arranged according to the Turkish model and the frescoes on the walls are inspired by the tradition of the Ottomans. At the Turkish mosque of Adjamé, the Qur'anic training delivered to women is based on educational materials published by Erkam, the publisher of the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation. At the beginning of the 2020s, a preacher was sent from Turkey to teach students the techniques of memorizing the Koran. At the mosque of the Al Fourqane community in the commune of Koumassi, a teaching program was initiated around the thought of Turkish Sufi sheikhs such as Saïd Nursî (1878–1960), the ideologue of the Gülen movement.



Figure 1: A screenshot of the Al-Farouq Community page inviting the public to one of its activities. Photo credit: Issouf Binaté



Many Muslim communities in Côte d'Ivoire have been influenced by Islamic practices and trends imported from Turkey. The Naqshbandiyya, one of the religious orders widespread in Turkey and Central Asia, has been emulated among the Ivoirian partners of Turkish religious foundations, excluding Salafi groups, who are part of anti-Sufi movements. In Abidjan, Imam Traoré Moctar, guide of the Zou-Nouraine Association for Education and Charitable Works (AZEOB) and formerly a member of the Tidjaniya Hamawiyya community, joined the Naqshbandiyya, as did some beneficiaries of Turkish social assistance. Since 2013, many female Muslim students have attended the school Fasl-ı Bahar KızKur'an Kursu for their Islamic training in Istanbul. These study programmes have introduced some of them to the Fiqh, Tasawuf, and Aqida, as well as to secular cultural elements such as the Turkish culinary tradition. In addition, the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi foundation supports Sohoba, a periodic seminar organized by AEEMCI on Islamic as well as secular topics. The maintenance of religious ties is also done through donations on the occasion of Islamic festivities, in particular the fasting of Ramadan, the celebrations of Eid and the pilgrimage to the holy places of Islam.



Figure 2: Kurban: Ceremony of immolation and distribution of beef during Eid 2016 in Abidjan. Photo credit: Issouf Binaté



## Conclusion

By a form of subtle proselytism, the Turkish-Ivoirian encounter contributed to the diversity of Islams in Côte d'Ivoire, where new religious movements close to Turkish preachers emerged. Some Ivoirian national Muslim organisations have been instrumental in advancing Turkish influence. This development has been accompanied by the construction and architectural reconfiguration of mosques as well as numerous investments in the religious infrastructure of Ivoirian cities. With various programmes of cooperation in the sector of education, which allow Ivoirian Muslim students to study in Turkey, the Turkish religious soft power has made the Islamic sphere in Côte d'Ivoire more composite and cosmopolitan. In this context already marked by religious diversity, the Ivoirian Muslim community finds itself reconfigured both by the plurality of newly emerging Islamic practices and by the presence of partners from other Muslim countries. In this field of transnational economic and religious enterprises, which also includes cooperation with countries such as Morocco and Iran, Turkey is becoming a major player.

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**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.

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