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RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND MODES OF COEXISTENCE IN URBAN WEST AFRICA

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Sociabilities and Religiosities in Urban Senegal

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Abstract

This article addresses the question of how social positioning and stratification influence religious diversity in urban Senegal. The author approaches religious diversity from a sociological point of view, with a methodological focus on intra-religious diversification. Based on contrastive case studies carried out in Dakar, the article analyses how forms of sociability that are characteristic of a specific social milieu contribute to distinctive religious identities and how people's social embeddedness shapes their own religious self-positioning. Linking Georg Simmel's (1984) concept of sociability with the formations of individual religiosities, the article provides an empirically grounded theoretical reflection on the interrelatedness of religious diversity with social heterogeneity in urban West Africa.

Keywords: Senegal, intra-religious diversity, individual religiosities, sociability, urban social milieus

Résumé:

Cet article traite de la question de l'influence du positionnement social et de la stratification sur la diversité religieuse dans les zones urbaines du Sénégal. L'auteur aborde la diversité religieuse d'un point de vue sociologique et en se concentrant méthodologiquement sur la diversification intra-religieuse. Sur la base d'études de cas contrastives menées à Dakar, l'article analyse comment les formes de sociabilité caractéristiques d'un milieu social spécifique contribuent à la formation d'identités religieuses distinctes et comment l'ancrage social des individus façonne leur propre auto-positionnement religieux. En reliant le concept de sociabilité de Georg Simmel aux formations des religiosités individuelles, l'article fournit une réflexion théorique empiriquement fondée sur l'interrelation entre la diversité religieuse et l'hétérogénéité sociale dans les zones urbaines d'Afrique de l'Ouest.

Mots-clés: Sénégal, diversité intra-religieuse, religiosités individuelles, sociabilité, milieux sociaux urbains

This article approaches religious diversity in urban Senegal – a country with a vast Muslim majority – from a sociological point of view and with a methodological focus on the formation of individual religiosities. More specifically, it considers diversity within diversity by focusing on how Islam is practiced and expressed within specific social milieus and in the context of particular practices. However, I am not concerned with religious diversity in terms of differing groups and collective identities, but rather with questions regarding people's own religious self-positioning. Moreover, I ask how individual religiosities are embedded in and shaped by their urban social environment and how they are, at the same time, contributing to its transformation. Based on contrastive case studies carried out in Dakar in 2017 and 2018,⁵ which I treated in more detail elsewhere (Sieveking 2020a), this contribution concentrates on the

⁵ These case studies were carried out in the framework of the ERC-project 693457 "Private Pieties. Mundane Islam and New Forms of Muslim Religiosity: Impact on Contemporary Social and Political Dynamics".



methodological aspects of my research. It provides an empirically grounded theoretical reflection on the interrelatedness of religious diversity with social heterogeneity in urban West Africa. I do this by linking Georg Simmel's (1984) concept of sociability with formations of individual religiosities, concentrating on the questions: How do forms of sociability that are characteristic of a specific social milieu contribute to distinctive religious identities? And how are social positioning and social stratification shaping religious diversity? Thereby my contribution addresses the aspect of intra-religious diversity, which can also be related to questions regarding the influence of cross-cutting religious and social distinctions on the formation of majority and minority constellations among the population.

My analysis of diverse Muslim sociabilities encompasses performative and aesthetic elements and indicates that a focus on embodied forms of sociability helps to understand the inherent diversity and specificities of Islam in the West African region in terms of a lived tradition.⁶ Moreover, forms of sociability can also be analysed as modes of religious distinction, while serving, at the same time, as modes of social distinction, thereby providing insights into the dynamics of modern urban transformations of Islamic traditions. In this respect, my research addresses religious diversity from the angle of social differentiation, heterogeneity and inequalities that are shaping the material and human infrastructures of religion in contemporary urban contexts. However, because my focus is restricted to francophone educated middle-class milieus in Dakar, my analysis does not consider the majority of the less privileged parts of the Senegalese population, but rather concentrates on minorities. With this restricted focus, I have sharpened my analytic lens through contrastive case studies on various urban leisure practices (Qur'an reading courses and fitness training) as well as on professional dance practices in the realm of contemporary choreography. These practices are linked to urban infrastructures, which provide a concrete spatial (material) and a determined temporal context for the formation of Muslim (religious and non-religious) sociabilities in Dakar. At the same time, they indicate how specific social and bodily practices create (human) religious infrastructures.

Exploring the formation of everyday Muslim sociabilities from various angles, I analyse how religious and non-religious sociabilities are interrelated and how they are embedded in their respective social environments. My approach goes along with an intersectional perspective that focuses on how gender, age and socio-economic positioning are shaping encounters between people with diverse religiosities. Beyond the micro-level of encounters between individual actors, the interweaving of material and human infrastructure that enables the formation and re-enactment of sociabilities can also indicate temporal and spatial dynamics at

⁶ In contrast to Talal Asad's general concept of Islam as a discursive tradition, Rudolph Ware (2014) highlights the specific non-discursive forms of embodied knowledge that characterise traditions of Islamic education in West Africa. In his study of the specific Islamic sociability practiced within the Gülen Community in Istanbul, Fabio Vicini (2014) also emphasises the non-discursive embodied forms of everyday lived religiosity.



play on meso- and macro-levels. Yet, my use of ethnographical methods, reflecting my disciplinary background in social anthropology, privileges micro-sociological perspectives on social and cultural change with an actor-oriented approach and a focus on practice, embodiment and gender.

Before presenting empirical case studies on Muslim sociabilities in different urban contexts, I will first give an outline of the dynamics of religious diversification in Senegal and then explain how Simmel's concept of sociability can be used as a heuristic tool to examine the distinctive qualities of socio-religious milieus in urban Senegal.

Contextualising Islamisation and religious diversification in Senegal

The often-appraised culture of tolerance and hospitality (Wolof: *teranga*) in Senegal is strongly related to so-called "Senegalese Islam" – a label that is associated with local forms of Sufi Islam, which are deeply embedded in the fabric of Senegalese society. Although the current situation of political crisis, violent tensions and contestations indicates that the conditions for social peace in Senegal and its supposed tolerant democratic culture are deeply undermined and under threat, local religious institutions are still considered important factors of moderation and pacification. With an estimated 96% majority of Muslim population, the Senegalese religious landscape can nevertheless be characterized as diverse. Its most salient feature is various Sufi orders (Arab: *turuq*, plural of *tariqa*: way). Historically, the *turuq* were the major forces of Islamisation, which started in the eleventh century in the northern part of the territory that later became Senegal. Massive Islamisation from below, however, only took place when the traditional social order of local kingdoms was breaking down under French colonial rule (Diouf 2013). The two major locally established *turuq* include branches of the Tijaniyya and the 'homegrown' Muridiyya, a *tariqa* with a local origin that grew out of the Qadiriyya. Their influence in Senegal was never limited only to the religious sphere, but has also permeated in the political and economic realms.

Since colonial times, the relations of Sufi religious leaders (*marabouts*) with the state have been characterized by mutual accommodation and intervention. Reformist movements, which appeared on the Senegalese religious landscape beginning in the 1930s (Loimeier 2016), opposed these power arrangements, criticizing not only the secular state but also questioning the authority of the *marabouts*. These new reformist groups have been most influential through their activities in the (public and private) education sector. Their persistent call for the introduction of arabo-islamic elements in public schools and their demand for educational reform were eventually successful, as the national educational reform, initiated in 2002 under the presidency of Abdoulaye Wade, indicates (Bodian and Villalón 2015). Yet, in the meantime, reformist tendencies have also developed within the popular local *turuq*, which are in a constant process of internal conflicts and subdivisions but still dominating the pluralistic



religious field in Senegal. Hence, processes of “Islamisation from below” within Senegalese society have been characterized by a religious diversification, in which impulses by Islamic reform movements and the factor of education have played an important role – in the religious sphere as well as beyond. However, particularly in urban contexts, an analysis of the effects of this diversification must consider the formation and social embeddedness of individual religiosities (Seck 2010).

In the literature on how Senegalese society has experienced change since the generalized socio-economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, the strong involvement of the urban youth and the increasing engagement of women in religious movements has often been highlighted (Diouf and Leichtman 2009). Especially women’s engagement in religious education indicates the deep entanglements of Islamisation and urbanization processes. Many young women who have received secular school or even higher education have also engaged in religious education and their knowledge about the Qur’an has often risen far beyond that of their parents (Augis 2012). On the basis of this knowledge, they are not only claiming religious autonomy but also the right to decide their own life trajectory, including decisions concerning marriage, family life, and their own professional careers. In terms of social aspirations, these women are oriented towards a modern urban lifestyle that combines Western middle-class living standards with globalized Islamic lifestyle ideals (Augis 2013).

Hence, the dynamics of religious diversification are not only emerging from within the religious field nor are they restricted to it – they are also reinforced by (as well as reinforcing) broader social transformation processes that go along with urbanization. These dynamics include the effects of demographic change, which is particularly salient regarding the declining birth rates of women in Dakar,⁷ and entails shifting gender relations and the restructuring of family life. Further elements of change are the translocal rural-urban as well as transnational migration networks, which form an integral part of the social fabric of Senegalese cities and are contributing to the (religious) diversity of the urban population. Last but not least, education plays an important role in religious diversification. It is a crucial element in processes of social differentiation, shaping gendered mobilities and various forms of migration (Neveu-Kringelbach 2015). The religious diversity of cities in Senegal is strongly interrelated with the diverse forms and degrees of (religious and secular) education among the respective urban population. As in other West African contexts too, the increasing heterogeneity of urban middle classes is a characteristic of these interrelated processes of social transformation (Alber 2016: 178).

⁷ Dial (2008: 93) refers to the results of studies carried out between 2001 and 2003 in Dakar which show that the average birth rate of women in their 30s has declined from 4 children (among the generation born between 1942-56) to 1.4 children (among the generation born between 1967-76).



The question of how religious diversity can be understood through the distinct socio-religious milieus which are shaped by these transformations of urban everyday life is at the core of my research. It also guides the reflections on my methodological approach to diversity within religious diversity in this paper. As a first step towards answering the question, I developed an empirically grounded method that systematically examines the distinctive characteristics of a particular socio-religious milieu by focusing on the “forms of sociability” (Simmel 1984: 52) that can be observed within this milieu. In the next step, I compared the sociabilities embodied in various practices, religious as well as non-religious, that are partly milieu-specific and partly crossing the social boundaries of specific milieus.

Conceptualising sociability as a heuristic tool

My conceptual approach has been inspired by Georg Simmel’s (1984) writings on sociability (German: “Geselligkeit”), a term by which he denotes particularly valued forms of togetherness (German: “Miteinander”) that are typically embodied in voluntary associations. A fundamental characteristic of sociability, according to Simmel’s conceptualisation, is the pure joy of togetherness and the absence of any “rational”, instrumental or strategic reason for associating. Therefore, he conceives of sociability as the “playform” of society (Simmel 1984: 53). Forms of sociability have an aesthetic dimension and are embodied through tacit rules of appropriate behaviour, politeness, tactfulness, etc.... For Simmel, these aesthetic qualities and implicit rules correspond to an idea of “the good form” (Simmel 1984: 52) of sociable interaction that is shared by the participants of a sociable encounter. Knowledge about this “good form” remains unspoken and largely unconscious, but it has to be enacted in order to achieve the specific joyful, amicable and pleasurable qualities of sociability. Sociable practice requires the banishing of any referents of “inappropriate form”, including, for example, overtly utilitarian political or economic motives for participating in a sociable encounter, which should remain in the “shadow realm” of sociability (Anderson 2015: 28–29). Another important aspect of sociability is the fact that it (temporarily) excludes the “reality” in terms of differences in socio-economic status and allows for a quality of relations “as if everybody was equal” (Simmel 1984: 58).

Rather *en passant*, Simmel (1984) remarks that sociability is best enacted within the boundaries of a given social milieu or class – a sociable encounter that transgresses such boundaries can easily become embarrassing, as he points out. This remark is particularly interesting when applying the concept of sociability as a heuristic tool for observing, describing and analysing distinct socio-religious milieus in urban Senegal. Different socio-religious milieus in Senegal can be distinguished by their specific “sociability ethos” – an ethos that characterizes their ‘typical’ ways of interacting and their particularly valued forms of being together (Renou 2003: 56). To be able to comply with the tacit rules of diverse Muslim sociabilities that characterize the pluralistic Senegalese religious landscape, a person has to master specific “registers”



of sociability (Renou 2003: 56). These registers are not defined by explicit ethical codes or religious doctrines – they are part of the social habitus and the embodied cultural capital of the respective socio-religious milieu.

Against this conceptual background, we can ask: to what extent are religious sociabilities in Senegalese cities encompassing different social milieus? And to what extent are distinctive Muslim sociabilities restricted to a particular class, social category or stratum?

Contrastive case studies on Muslim sociabilities in Dakar

The ways in which individual religiosities in urban Senegal are embodied and lived on a daily basis include a range of social practices (some framed as religious, others as non-religious) that are shaped by particular forms of sociability. This can be illustrated by my contrastive case studies on professional dancers and on different leisure practices (Qur'an reading courses and fitness training) within Dakar's middle-class milieus which indicate that, in their daily lives, people switch between different registers of Muslim sociability.⁸ However, in order to be practiced appropriately, forms of sociability have to be incorporated over time. They cannot be adopted spontaneously by free choice, since they often depend on an embodied milieu-specific habitus. In this respect, religious (as much as non-religious) sociabilities also function as markers of social distinction (Sieveking 2022).

Focus on middle-class milieus

My fieldwork on Muslim religiosities in Senegal, carried out in 2017 and 2018, concentrated on selected middle-class milieus in Dakar where I explored the ways in which this specific social environment is shaping the religiosity of the inhabitants. One of the findings of this research was the observation that the dynamics of (re-)Islamisation in Dakar's middle classes go along with a trend towards individualization and claims for autonomy in defining one's own private religiosity – a trend that can also be observed in other Muslim contexts (Föllmer et al. 2022).

Although symbols of Islam are almost omnipresent in the Senegalese public sphere, not all Muslims are particularly religious or consider themselves pious. In order to acknowledge this and avoid a 'religious bias', I carried out contrastive case studies on urban leisure as well as professional artistic practices that included a Qur'an reading course as well as 'non-religious' practices like contemporary dance or fitness training (Sieveking 2021). I was curious if the manifestations of individual religiosities and people's religious self-positioning in these different

⁸ Ethnographic case studies in other Senegalese cities, including Saint-Louis and Kaolack, have shown, furthermore, how distinctive urban Muslim sociabilities are taking form in each of these contexts. These studies were carried out within the framework of my MIASA-fellowship (September – December 2022) in collaboration with Abdourahmane Seck, coordinator of the Critical Studies Action Group – Africa (GAEC) and four GAEC-Africa volunteer-researchers (<https://gaecafrika.org/gaec-africa-west-africa-ghana-sinopsis-program-miasa-acra/>).



fields of practice would overlap or contradict and mutually exclude each other. Comparing the sociability of a particular brand of Qur'an reading courses for "intellectuals" (Sieveking 2020b; 2022) with typical forms of fitness training sociability indicated surprising parallels, namely regarding gender relations and the fact that 'gender mixing' in these specific contexts of practice were not perceived as a problem. Indeed, the tacit acknowledgment and practical enactment of gender equality among participants of the Qur'an reading as well as of the fitness training courses were an important factor for their success. They not only corresponded to the embodied modern lifestyle and habitus of the respective target group but were also associated with a supposed 'professionalism' and 'effectiveness' of pedagogical methods that do not rely on gender segregation. On a practical level, the aspect of gender difference mostly remained in the "shadow realm" of sociable interactions within these contexts of practice where everybody behaved "as if" everybody (male as well as female participants) was equal (Sieveking 2022: 791).

Focus on dance practices

By contrast, in the context of dance practices the body and its gendered aspects are often strongly eroticized and sexualised and therefore generally perceived as immoral and a potential threat to any pious Muslim. In contrast to the context of fitness training, gender mixing as well as the visible display of large parts of the body in the context of popular dance events were conceived by most of my Muslim interlocutors as highly problematic with regard to the principles of Islam, if not categorically *haram*. Nevertheless, in many conversations my interlocutors also conceded that local cultural traditions and popular performative and ritual practices were de facto contradicting rigid religious restrictions. These contradictions were often discussed in a very joyful manner, expressing the appreciation and pride people were taking in their own cultural forms of sociability, including the practice of a rather 'soft' and malleable version of Islam. In fact, rhetorical skills and wit deployed in comments on the contradictions of everyday lived religiosities are highly appreciated elements of sociable conversations – although not in every situation. Ironic comments on 'typically Senegalese' Muslim religiosities were, for example, not appropriate during the Qur'an reading courses, but they could be a valued part of coffee breaks or amicable conversations among participants outside the classroom.

In contrast to people who are jokingly commenting the 'irreligious' bodily and performative practices of many Senegalese Muslims, the situation of people who have made dance their profession is different. For professional dancers, the contradictions between the requirements of their professional occupation and the expectations of their Muslim social environment are serious and often experienced as a painful conflict and existential dilemma. Instead of just temporarily moving in and out of the sociable forms of a dance event, the 'irreligious' exposure of their bodies on stage is constant and cannot be ignored. It is a condi-



tion that was considered by all my interlocutors as particularly problematic for Muslim women. However, in other contexts, such as ritualised family ceremonies, women's dancing was perceived as appropriate, while men were expected to refrain from it. In a general manner, my contrastive case studies showed that whereas dance sociabilities put the gendered body on centre stage, it remained symbolically silenced in the other contexts of urban leisure practices mentioned above.

Conclusion

Exploring the formation of everyday (religious and non-religious) Muslim sociabilities in specific milieus of Dakar, my research provides an empirically grounded theoretical reflection on religious diversity in urban West Africa. My approach corresponds with an intersectional perspective that focuses on how the gender and socio-economic positioning of the actors observed in the various settings are shaping sociable encounters. It emphasizes the micro-level of encounters between individual actors, but the interweaving of material and human infrastructure that enables the formation and re-enactment of sociabilities can also be explored to analyse temporal and spatial dynamics at play on meso- and macro-levels.

Up to the first decade of the 2000s and including the beginning of the second mandate of president Abdoulaye Wade, the recurrent (self-)representation of the Senegalese state as a stable democracy and its society as particularly tolerant was rarely questioned. Its relative stability and social peace, which constituted its "exceptionalism" as compared to other countries in the West African region (Smith 2013; Villalón 1995: 2) has often been related to its cultural and religious pluralism and its specific forms of "Muslimness". In order to analyse how tolerance and inclusion are practiced in Senegalese society "from below", Etienne Smith (2013: 149) explicitly refers to the notion of sociability. Based on a survey in Dakar in 2006, he claims that there is a particular "sociability ethos shared by many terroirs, cutting across linguistic or religious divides" in Senegal, and thereby sustaining peaceful coexistence. This claim, which connects the micro-level of various "sociocultural practices and values" with the macro-level of the nation and its various terroirs, does not explicitly address the question of religious diversity nor the effects of social heterogeneity in the urban sphere.⁹

⁹ Moreover, Smith's analysis refers to a historical moment, where the current socio-political crisis, which unfolded around the prospects of a contested third mandate of president Macky Sall, could not yet be predicted. After his re-election in 2019 the ensuing systematic oppression of any serious opposition against his government has especially targeted the most successful opposition candidate, Ousmane Sonko, who is relatively young and particularly popular among the urban youth. The extent of political violence enacted by the state, escalating in June 2023, the loss of trust in the rightful execution of its power and the degree of discontent, anger and frustration among the population were still quite unimaginable in 2006.



Hence, the question of how far a shared “sociability ethos” can also cut across the boundaries of different (urban) social milieus remains open. Moreover, with respect to rising socio-economic inequalities on various scales, one can also ask about the limits of sociable practices. To what extent are forms of (religious) sociability, which rely on an enactment of togetherness “as if” everybody was equal, related to forms of embodied religiosity that rather maintain or even enforce social stratification? By raising these questions, I want to indicate that we can gain a great deal from exploring the interrelatedness of sociabilities and religiosities when studying religious diversity in the context of rapid urbanization and deep social transformation processes in West African cities.

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Biographical Notes

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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-convenor 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-convenor of IFG 7 at MIASA.