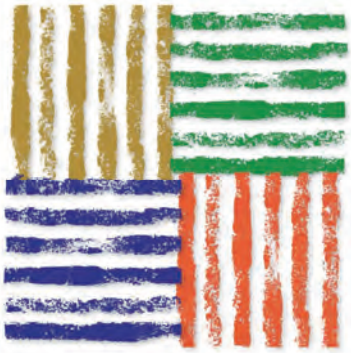


MIASA

Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND MODES OF COEXISTENCE IN URBAN WEST AFRICA

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Conceptual Reflections on Approaches to Religious Diversity and Modes of Coexistence in Urban West Africa*

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Abstract
This article introduces the research of MIASA's IFG 7 project titled "Religious Diversity in Urban West Africa: Exploring Modes of Coexistence for Sustainable Governance". It conceptualises the methodological approach of the group by identifying three main thematic axes that emerged from the overlapping individual approaches to the study of religious diversity in urban centres, namely 1) migration, mobilities, entrepreneurship, and trans-nationalism; (2) territoriality, power, and configurations of religious minorities and majorities; and (3) urban infrastructure(s).

Keywords: West Africa, religious diversity, coexistence, urban infrastructure

Résumé
Le présent article présente la recherche du projet de l'IFG 7 du MIASA intitulé "Diversité religieuse dans les villes d'Afrique de l'Ouest: Exploration des modes de coexistence pour une gouvernance durable". Il conceptualise l'approche méthodologique du groupe en identifiant trois axes thématiques principaux qui ont émergé des approches individuelles chevauchantes de l'étude de la diversité religieuse dans les centres urbains, notamment 1) la migration, les mobilités, l'entreprenariat et le transnationalisme ; 2) la territorialité, le pouvoir et les configurations des minorités et des majorités religieuses et; 3) l(es) infrastructure(s) urbaine(s).

Mots-clés: Afrique de l'Ouest, diversité religieuse, coexistence, infrastructure urbaine

This working paper presents some of the research results of MIASA's IFG 7 project titled "Religious Diversity in Urban West Africa: Exploring Modes of Coexistence for Sustainable Governance". The project started with the broader objective of examining how religions are forged by and affect the urban settings in which they are practiced as well as to explore empirically grounded modes of sustainable religious coexistence. As a group of researchers working on religious encounters in different West African cities, we then began to compare

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field notes and preliminary findings from our individual projects, in which we deployed different research methodologies (anthropological, historical, and phenomenological). As we reflected on our various, partly overlapping individual approaches, several empirical entry points to study religious diversity in urban centres emerged. Thus, we identified three main thematic axes that have guided us to our individual findings about modes of coexistence and that, bundled together, characterize our specific interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional methodological approach. These are 1) migration, mobilities, entrepreneurship, and trans-nationalism; (2) territoriality, power, and configurations of religious minorities and majorities; and (3) urban infrastructure(s).

Before discussing these thematic axes, we would like to first address the concept of diversity, particularly how religious diversity relates to the focus of our project on urban West Africa. We conclude our conceptual reflections with an outlook on the relevance of education (religious as well as secular) in shaping various dimensions of religious diversity, which becomes apparent in our research. Finally, we present the research projects of our group members in a synopsis of the concrete topics addressed in the individual contributions assembled in this working paper. Since some of the field research carried out within the framework of IFG 7 was still ongoing while writing our contributions for the present publication, what we are presenting here is work in progress.

Religious diversity in urban settings

Religious diversity is an ever-present and increasingly visible reality in cities across the world (Stringer 2013). Globalization processes and intensified mobility of capital, technologies, information, ideas and various categories of people (Appadurai 1990) have made scholars reflect more deeply on diversity or even "superdiversity" (Vertovec 2021) and, more specifically, on religious diversity in urban contexts. In West Africa, extraordinarily rapid urbanization is currently taking place against the background of a long history of urban settlements (Heinrigs 2020; Werthmann 2023). These contexts provide particularly productive laboratories for research on complex transformation processes and the entanglements and overlapping of various dimensions of diversity (social, cultural, ethnic, and religious). The complex settings of West African cities teach us that religious diversity should not just be considered in terms of religious differences, but should reflect the many ways of accommodating differences in belief and practice – what we refer to here as 'diversity within diversity' – not only in religious terms but also in terms of intersecting differences of socio-economic and political positionings of the actors involved.

In the context of the study of religion in Africa, Janson and Meyer (2016) argue that scholars have long focused on either Islam or Christianity, depending on their expertise. Soares (2006) also observes that until recently, where these religions are studied in combination across



space and time in Africa, scholars have often looked at what they have tended to call 'Christian-Muslim relations' (see, for example, Rasmussen 1993; Hock 2004; Hafkens 1995; Haroon 2007). Soares further highlights the analytical limitation of this method by pointing out that "such an approach assumes, often implicitly, that Christians and Muslims are identifiable and distinct groups with relatively neat boundaries, whose relations or interactions as groups or even blocs can be studied in various contexts" (2006: 1–2). He argues that it is surely a mistake to treat Muslims and Christians as large homogenous communities that interact as blocs. Highlighting these analytical limitations, Soares (2016) contends that religious interactions in Africa must be understood in their full complexity and suggests that focusing on "encounters" rather than "relations" would reveal such complexities. In other words, religious encounters provide broader analytical perspectives of understanding "religious pluralism – that is, the existence of different religious traditions in one space, but also the multiplicity of practices of pluralism, including the personal pluralism of individuals and groups who might engage with different religions or religious practices" (Soares 2016: 673). In contrast to their relations in other places in the world, boundaries between Christians, Muslims, and adherents of Traditional Religions in Africa have not always been rigid, fixed, or unchanging. Hence, understanding the complex dynamics of religious diversity has become critical in research on urban Africa. In addition to West African urban centres being spaces of religious encounters, they are also sites where religion influences almost all aspects of people's life, covering a range of different social, economic, and gender backgrounds (see, for example, Janson 2021; Nolte, Ogen, and Jones 2017; Boeck 2013).

Our IFG 7 project on religious diversity in urban Africa finds encounters as an entry point to understanding religious diversity helpful. Several of our individual findings show how and why followers of different religions in urban Africa, including African Traditional Religions which are often neglected, live side by side and share so much to an extent that they convert to each other's religions, as well as learn, appropriate, and borrow from each other. In a general manner, our project is interested in all aspects of religious encounters that highlight the trajectories of diversity in the sense that we do not especially focus on groups of religious experts but on religiosities in the everyday life of different fringes of the urban population, including pious ones. Moreover, our approach to religious diversity includes intersectionality as a cross-cutting perspective of analysis, which provides important guidelines for empirical research in the 'field' as well as for the analysis of various intersecting relations of difference such as gender, ethnicity, class, and religious identifications at later stages of data processing (Kerner 2017).

As a result of our different disciplinary backgrounds, individual research trajectories, and the respective empirical foci of our fieldwork, we have come to concentrate on different but strongly interrelated dimensions of religious diversity which have emerged from our empirical points of entry through the abovementioned thematic axes. In the following, we will present the three main axes and how they interrelate to each other.

Migration, mobilities, entrepreneurship, and transnationalism

Human migration continuously influences cultural, social, and religious formations in given societies. Importantly, when talking about migration, we are referring to its broader meanings in terms of mobilities and circulations of both ideas and people as well as goods, cultural forms, and various (material and immaterial) elements of aesthetic formations (Meyer 2009). Migration and urbanization are intimately intertwined through processes of rural-urban as well as urban-urban, transnational, and transcontinental flows of people, things and ideas (Appadurai 1990). Since urban populations and cultures are constantly changing due to migration, one body of literature that speaks to our IFG project is that which engages the question of how migration has become a key reference not only in the emergence of African cities but in influencing their diversity and the complex interweaving of religious and non-religious layers of their social fabric. Research on migration and mobilities also sheds light on (more or less) temporal modes of coexistence and their sustainability or precariousness in terms of livelihood opportunities provided by the urban environment.

The concept of infrastructure, which will be treated in more detail below, marks a conjuncture of different strands of literature when it comes to addressing the religious dimensions of these migration and migration-driven processes. Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist (2014) as well as Tilmann Heil (2021) offer useful perspectives on migration as infrastructure. Heil's approach emphasizes how migrants are contributing to city-making by interweaving, in their daily activities, the various cultural forms, practices and socio-material components that make up the fabric of urban life. Xiang and Lindquist (2014) suggest focusing not only on the ways in which migrants move and create new infrastructures by themselves but also on how they are moved by others. This is shaped in terms of how migrations are framed by brokers, bureaucrats, transport companies, state policies, etc., as well as how the systematically interlinked technologies and institutions, including states and non-state actors, facilitate and condition mobility (Kleist and Bjarnesen 2019). Thus, it is important to emphasize that diversity is also dependent on how states or private agencies organize it, and hence on how religious practices and institutions are regulated by both state and non-state actors.



These different categories of actors indicate that migrations and mobilities are strongly intertwined with entrepreneurship and the fact that urban infrastructures are attracting people within as well as across national borders in terms of the educational, social, political, and economic opportunities they offer both translocally (see Zaami's contribution) and transnationally (see Binate's contribution). Such opportunities, however, can also become sites of conflict and contestation over legitimate access to and control over resources. This aspect can be linked with the rather conflictive and controversial dimensions of religious diversity and coexistence that arise when mobility turns into the issue of control over space (see Dumbe's contribution). In this regard, mobility and migration can be related to power struggles concerning territoriality and configurations of religious majorities and minorities.

Territoriality, power, and configurations of religious minority & majority settings

Territoriality refers to the attempt to affect, influence, or control actions, interactions, or access by asserting and attempting to enforce control over a specific space (Sack 1983). Hence, territoriality involves spatial strategies associated with maintaining or challenging political, economic, and cultural power dynamics (Peleman 2003).[1]

However, the link between territoriality and religious diversity is not only articulated through struggles for control over physical space; place-making and the occupation or claiming of territory can also be part of struggles for authority and leadership in the religious realm. Moreover, controlling urban space through secular institutions of governance can be counteracted by sacred authority enacted in the religious sphere. For instance, a state may use secularity as a way to regulate religious co-existence, not privileging one above the other, but the question of how religious actors react and relate to secular state power would remain. It may be the case that legally, politically or culturally a certain religion is privileged over other religions, as is the case in many African countries. In both instances, different secular-religious arrangements impact how religious groups use urban space and coexist in it in various settings regarding religious minority and majority constellations. Such constellations are often fraught with tensions, sometimes articulated in the dichotomy between autochthone and allochthone groups of population (see Dumbe's contribution). Religious diversity is not neutral in this respect – religious majority and minority settings are more often than not associated with meanings that set one religion against another in terms of 'us' and 'them', or 'authentic' local culture vs. 'foreign', 'imported' and culturally 'alien' elements.

[1] A slightly different meaning is associated with the French term "terroir", which focuses less on the aspect of power and rather connotes the specificity of a geographically determined space with its cultural uses (such as in agriculture), linking human and natural/material/physical aspects of a particular space.

Against this background, we pay attention to diversity within diversity in terms of temporal (sub-)group formations, shifting alliances and affiliations, and regarding the multiple, more or less conscious layers of religious experiences and embodied practices. Even after one form of religious pluralism is distinguished from other sorts, a variety of positions could still be considered within each as versions of religious pluralism. The question here is how various forms of religious affiliations, as well as qualities and degrees of belongings, can be taken into consideration, how they contribute to the multiplicity of ideals and aspirations, and how much influence they have on the formation of religious subgroups.

Some of the studies in this collection, such as Zaami's and Ibrahim's contributions, deal with these ambivalences while approaching religious diversity through minority-majority encounters. In using this approach, we are referring to ways in which popular practices involving majority and minority groups may disrupt hegemony or (re)configure the religious sphere in ways that promote pluralism. An example of this is offered in Ibrahim's contribution, which shows how 'Jesus *mawlid*' and street processions practiced by a combination of Shia Muslims and Christians are marking the presence of religious minorities at a time when Sunni Muslims in northern Nigeria were consolidating their hegemony through sharia reimplementation.

In their discussion of reconfiguring religious minorities and majorities in Nigeria, Ibrahim and Katz (2022) argue that there is no watertight boundary between those who belong to the majority and those who are in the minority. For example, while focusing on predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria, they show how Muslims find themselves simultaneously in one majority *and* in another minority (see Ibrahim's contribution). The same applies elsewhere. For instance, while Ghana remains a Christian-majority country, Muslims are a dominant group within some neighbourhoods, mostly those called *zongos* (see Zaami's contribution). In other words, since *zongos* are not exclusively Muslim quarters, Christians formed a minority there though they are the majority on a national scale. Yet Christians might still see the Muslims who are the majority in a neighbourhood such as Madina, a suburb in Accra, as a threat, and 'indigenous' Ga Muslims, who are the minority within the broader Accra Muslim population, might see non-Ga Muslims as migrants from northern Ghana and neighbouring countries who do not really belong, as shown by Dumbe's contribution.

This majority-minority reconfiguration shows how religious groups and their evolving cultures are eluding some of the typical categorizations scholars have often assigned to them. Ibrahim and Katz (2022) call for careful historical grounding of specific terms used, such as 'majority' and 'minority', which also serve as analytical categories. They also show how focusing on multiple minorities (including interfaith minorities) reveals minority groups' creative approaches to not just remain but to also grow and carve out space for themselves within the



wider religious geography of urban spaces (Ibrahim and Katz 2022). Moreover, this differentiation of minority-majority constellations points to the aspect of scale, encompassing national, inter- and intra-urban levels.

Urban infrastructure(s) – including material, immaterial and/or human infrastructure

As compared to the other two axes, the dimension of urban infrastructure can be seen as the most comprehensive methodological pathway regarding the inclusion of materiality into the study of religious diversity. As an abstract conceptual framework, it allows us to analyse the interweaving of material, physical as well as nonphysical, and human infrastructure. We can speak of 'socio-material' infrastructures, shaping the lived experiences of religious diversity and coexistence in urban space. Religious practice is often about both controlling space and enchanting space (de Witte 2008), as well as (re-)creating community through the embodiment of "sensational forms" and the performative enactment of "aesthetic formations" (Meyer 2009; 2016). These perspectives reinforce the idea of "iconic religion" and the tangible presence of religions through religious buildings, sites, and artefacts in urban spaces (Knott, Krech, and Meyer 2016).

Approaching the study of religion through infrastructure as an analytical concept has been productive in the post-secular era. Postsecularism, as popularized by Habermas (2008), refers to various theories regarding the continued presence or revival of religious beliefs and practices in the present. It challenges the secularisation theories that predicted the decline or complete disappearance of religion as it conflicted with the concept of modernity. According to the secularisation theory of modernity, religion was supposed to be confined to the private sphere, as it was considered to be an internal and personal matter. However, present-day societies prove otherwise, as religion remains a crucial aspect of human life, and its visibility in the public sphere has increased, taking on various forms. This has led to the emergence of "post-secular" perspectives that seek to understand religion with a turn to its materiality and/or its external manifestations (Keane 2008; Meyer 2008). These perspectives have also led to a turn towards infrastructures.

The concept of "religious infrastructure" was initially described as an arrangement of assets (particularly buildings and facilities) that enable and support the activities of a religious organization or community (infrastructure for religion). However, scholars have recently proposed conceiving of religion itself as infrastructure (Hoelzchen and Kirby 2020: 2). Whereas the latter conceptual approach is still rather tentative, we find it inspirational because it allows conceiving of religion as infrastructure enabling activities and social formations that might be non-religious. The two understandings are not mutually exclusive and are also open for a third perspective, which focuses on the ways in which infrastructures are symbolically marked as religious. These approaches simultaneously invoke material and non-material infrastructures

in addressing the question of how religion interfaces with other aspects of the social and physical environments in shaping human lives (see Ibrahim's contribution). In the same vein, Hoelzchen and Kirby (2020) point out that research on the interrelations between religion and infrastructure share at least two common interests. First, they draw attention to the hybrid and relational composition of religious and infrastructural formations. Second, they are interested in their agentive effects – their capacity to shape distinctive kinds of actors and interactions.

Yet, although the temporality of infrastructure has not been ignored in the recent "infrastructural turn" in anthropology (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018), the common understanding of infrastructure tends to highlight its spatiality and the way it creates a stable order in physical space. Moreover, the focus on "agentive effects" leaves inherent sociable qualities and ascribed values of religious practices and encounters rather out of sight. By contrast, we suggest that the dimension of urban infrastructure can be productively linked with an analysis of the specific forms and practices of sociability that are enabled by specific (material and immaterial) infrastructures (see Sieveking's contribution).

Some of our individual field studies (Sieveking and Zaami) clearly show that (and how) access to urban infrastructure is gendered. Adopting an intersectional perspective, it becomes clear that social class/ social positioning also plays a role. Hence, some of our projects are particularly attentive to the relations between religion/ religiosity and social class. This research perspective has recently been given special attention with regards to Muslim societies (Samson and LeBlanc 2022) but has also been addressed by research on Christian populations (Pauli 2019).

With questions regarding the link between religiosity and social class positioning, the aspect of education also comes to the fore. Some case studies of our individual research projects explicitly deal with the dimension of religious and/ or secular education (Binate, Zaami and Sieveking). Moreover, education can be considered under the lens of territoriality and power, which points to the different historical trajectories of Christian and Islamic education on the continent (see Dumbe's contribution; see also Launay 2016).

It must be highlighted that in urban West Africa, anglo- or francophone education constitutes a colonial legacy that associates Christianity with models of modern Western education, even if the state might have adopted the idea of secular public education, following a French model. Whereas Islamic educational institutions also encompass modern pedagogical models (Brenner 2007; Tayob et al. 2011), they have a different historical trajectory and other meanings in postcolonial Africa and are often (wrongly) opposed to notions of modern education in a generalising manner. While this stereotypical opposition reappears in many conflictual settings of religious diversity on the continent, such as in the case of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, we suggest focusing on how education interconnects not only with religious infra-structures, but also with religion as infrastructure.



Individual contributions by IFG 7-members

The five contributors in this collection of working papers engage in conversation about religious diversity and modes of co-existence in urban Africa from the three thematic axes outlined. However, they are not directly policy-oriented and do not pretend to give any blueprint for sustainable peaceful coexistence, but rather call for a careful and differentiated analysis of the categories in which we perceive and discuss religious diversity. The empirical case studies presented illustrate the relevance of religious diversity for sustainable convivial coexistence in Africa in various ways. Dumbe's contribution examines Intra-Muslim conflict between groups of Muslim 'migrants' from northern Ghana and other countries of the subregion and indigenous Ga 'converts' in Accra, which manifests through leadership contests and leads to religious territorialisation in the same city. Binate's contribution examines the multi-layered encounter between Turkey and Côte d'Ivoire, which started with the state-driven "diplomatic offensive" towards the African continent by Turkey in the late 1990s. Binate highlights how "soft power" deployed by the Turkish government goes along with activities of various Turkish transnational religious entrepreneurs who are reconfiguring Ivoirian Muslim communities by making them more plural and diverse. Based on contrastive case studies in Dakar, Sieveking analyses the interrelatedness of religious diversity and social heterogeneity in Senegalese cities. She discusses how diverse Muslim sociabilities encompass performative and aesthetic elements and indicates embodied forms of sociability that can be analysed as modes of religious distinction. These three papers allow us to appreciate how intra-religious diversity is equally important for small groups and individuals.

From the perspectives of inter-faith diversity, Zaami's paper examines religious pluralism in Madina (Accra by examining the life trajectories of migrants from northern Ghana. Whereas these migrants contributed and are still contributing to shaping Madina as one of the most diverse neighbourhoods in Accra, the same space also shapes individual migrants' religious worldviews. Her case studies demonstrate how individual religiosity contributes to understanding diversity or lack of it in an urban setting. Approaching religious diversity through the concept of infrastructure as "socio-material," Ibrahim's paper shows how religious activities, including those by transnational religious movements, not only shaped religiosity in urban space but also disclosed how that raised questions about diversity through cultural discourse among urban dwellers in northern Nigeria.

In sum, while speaking to each other, the papers combined show that the multiple realities of religious diversity constitute a project – not only in terms of analytical approaches. Peaceful and sustainable modes of coexistence are not something ready-made or something that can be definitively achieved – they might be lost and recreated anew, reflecting the rapidly transforming life-worlds of urban dwellers on the African continent.

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