

The contemporary expansion of corporate Islam in rural West Africa

1. Ethnographic motivation: According to mainstream media, as a result of the pressure of armed groups of Islamic allegiance, the State has recently withdrawn from large areas of the Sahel (central Mali; northeast Burkina Faso, northeast Nigeria). Alarming discourses have also been thriving among experts on West Africa since the fall of Gaddafi in the region. Security advisors are even speculating that southern regions of Muslim West Africa were about to fall in the hands of terrorist organizations promoting anti-Western agenda. While acknowledging the issue of insecurity in the Sahel, arguments for a southward spread of terrorist Islamist organizations are based on emotional speculation rather than solid empirical foundations. Faced with a post 9/11 revival of a fear of an „evil” pan-Islamism which is also nurtured by the current Global War on Terrorism, there is an urgent need to offer concrete depictions of Muslim organizations operating in rural West Africa in order to decipher the actual motivations of those who choose to join these Muslim organizations. It is also of crucial importance to understand the genuine aspirations, tensions, and transformations that mobilize their members in an era marked by new forms of organization, growing connectivity (e.g. mobile internet access), and a search for a moral, prosperous, and modern life. This urgency is moreover enhanced by the scarcity of ethnographic work on Muslim life tout court in rural West Africa.

This research project thus explores, through multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, four representative case-studies of Muslim organizations (Muslim women in Niger, Muslim NGO in Ivory Coast, Muslim youth of modernist Salafi¹ identity in Nigeria, new Sufi identity in Guinea and Mali) which are expanding their activities in rural areas. Accumulating 40 months of ethnographic fieldwork among Muslims living in rural regions of a pre-crisis southern Mali (2008-2010) and a post-conflict northern Ivory Coast (2014-2019), the project investigator (PI) has the necessary experience to supervise with carefulness this demanding ethnographic inquiry.

2. Brief state of the art in the study of Muslim organizations in contemporary rural West Africa: Most monographs of Muslim organization in contemporary West Africa are related to the urban (Mommersteeg 2009, Janson 2014; Soares 2005), more precisely to large towns (Alidou 2005, Miran 2006, Murtala 2017, Schulz 2012).² This focus on the urban has also been fostered by the common association made between processes of globalization and large towns (Appadurai 1996, Sassen 2002). Masquelier undertook fieldworks in the *Arrondissement* of Dogondouchi (Niger) but to above all explore how a set of religious practices of the so-called African traditional religions has been shaped by the spread of Islam in this mostly rural area (2001). Masquelier returned to the same area a decade later to investigate Muslim women’s mixed receptions of the increasing reformist Izala influences in their localities (2009).³ *What I have observed through a decade of ethnographic works in southern Mali and in northern Ivory Coast, however, refer to a more recent development of Islam across West Africa: the ramifications of modern forms of Muslim organization into rural areas.* What I call “the contemporary expansion of corporate Islam in rural West Africa” is being neither explored in Swiss universities nor abroad. I do so through three interrelated thematic perspectives.

¹ On modern Salafism or Wahhabi-inclined reform movements in West Africa, see Ahmed (2015), Kobo (2012), and Sounaye (2017). Others call them reformist movements; Loimeier rightly remind us that any religious movement is by nature reformist, at least in its inception (2016).

² Rare are anthropologists exploring rural realities in depth; for a notable exception, see Paolo Gaibazzi (2015).

³ Another notable exception: for Baay faal, living in a secluded community is an important part of their religious education (Pezeril 2008).

3. Ethnographic foundations of the thematic perspectives (TP): The PI's experience of the corporative "federation" of the Muslim organization *Ansar Dine* (AD) during a massive religious gathering organized in Bamako (Chappatte 2018) supports the **TP1** of the project: ***New forms of religious organization in West Africa: the emergence of corporate Islam***. During fieldworks in southern Mali and northern Ivory Coast the PI noticed that AD was actively opening *sous-sections* and *comités* in rural localities, an observation that initiates the **TP2: *Muslim activism in rural regions***. The **TP3, *the phenomenology of religious experience***, ensues from the PI's longstanding interest in positioning human experience at the hearth of social analysis (Chappatte et al. 2018). This ethnographic inquiry meshes anthropological, political, and human geographic conceptual analyses.

3.1 Outline of TP1: We will explore processes of "corporatization" that Muslim organizations are currently undergoing; by this we mean a social form of power that acts through bureaucratic practices which are inspired by techniques of modern management *but* crafted locally.

Translating corporate Islam into West Africa: Recent works in anthropology have stressed the development of socio-legal forms of Islam in Southeast Asia (Müller 2017; Müller and Kerstin 2018; Sloane 2017). We want to translate similar interests on bureaucratic practices and corporate life into West African realities.

New forms of organization inspired by the transnational corporate culture: Traditionally, Muslim organizations in West Africa follow structures inspired by Sufi brotherhoods (Villalon 1995, Pezeril 2008) and mosque/*médresa*-based communities (Brenner 2001, Ware 2014). Muslim organizations, however, are increasingly adopting forms of organization inspired by the transnational corporate culture. We will investigate to what extent these new forms of Muslim organization have been borrowed from strategies initiated by local Pentecostal movements (Freeman 2012, Murtala 2017). We will probe inter-religious contacts as a 'religious field' shaped by forces of detachment and rapprochement, avoidance and affirmation (Jansen and Meyer 2016). We will then explore how these corporative forms are shaped by a power embedded in bureaucratic practices.

Exploring corporate bureaucracy as a social form of power: We will approach the corporatization of Muslim organizations as a recent socio-historical process which puts forward organizational strategies that aim to "rationalize" with techniques of management the integration of followers, their governance, and their growth. The key concept here is "corporate bureaucracy" which will be explored as 'a social form of power' (Hibou 2013, 2015). the study of the practices of this corporate bureaucracy (e.g. procedures and quantifications, vocabulary and titles) will inform us on how this relational power is exercised in these Muslim organizations and shapes social relations between its members. In doing so, this research project will explore corporate Islam as an emerging organizational power, articulated to local religious expressions, which shapes the religious allegiance and sense of community as well as transforms the religious experience of Muslim actors who live and engineer it.

Analyzing corporate practices as local crafts: We are interested in the ways Muslims invest in corporate Islam to fulfill what they think is a moral, prosperous, and modern way of life. We will document how Africans, through local sensibility and *savoir-faire*, are actively crafting techniques, which originate from another cultural pole, to build a meaningful life (e.g. Lambertz 2017). Probing the '*appropriation imaginaire*' of bureaucracy in sub-Saharan (Bayart 2013), we will consequently investigate to what extent such corporative strategies are "modernizing" older religious institutions of West Africa. We will therefore explore global-local entanglements through an 'anthropology in the middle' that study 'the betwixt and between' of social life (Knauff 2006).

3.2 Outline of TP2: We will examine, within changing political dynamics, the ramifications of corporate forms of Muslim activism into rural “lifepace”. This new concept helps us to explore the rural as a network of small towns and villages marked by growing connectivity (mass-consumption; mobile internet access).

Framing Muslim activism in changing political dynamics: The post-Cold War era has been characterised by political shifts that brought new civic liberties in West Africa. The opening of the early 1990s was then followed by authoritative restorations against the backdrop of the insecurity of the Sahel. States have also failed to provide basic social services to their populations due to the 1980s debt crisis and related IFM structural adjustment programs (Soares and Leblanc 2008); this has fostered the involvement of Muslim organizations in charity (Leblanc & Audet Gosselin 2016). We will contextualize Muslim activism in our respective ethnographic sites.

African places in an era of mass-consumption and mobile internet access: In his ethnography of the provincial town of Koudougou (Burkina Faso) Hilgers reminds us that urbanites still live in ‘places’ (2009, 2012). Globalization touches all localities, but we also want to move away from its spatial connections. We will therefore focus on the concept of place as “a space that is lived in” (see Feld and Basso 1996; Relph 1976; Sheppard 2002; Tuan 1977). What does “living in places” mean in smaller localities? Anthropologists demonstrated how allegedly “out-of-the-way places” develop multidimensional engagements with the wider world (Piot 1999, Shaw 2002, Tsing 1993); the study of these engagements, however, needs to be renewed. We will investigate how the post-2000s mass-consumption of foreign goods (Chappatte 2014) and the current spread of mobile internet access in rural African localities (Vokes 2018; Wyche and Olson 2018) shape people’s perceptions of their places.

Rethinking rural West Africa through “lifepace”: While we acknowledge the tremendous power of capitalist urbanization in a world marked by demographic booms in most of its regions (Brenner 2016; 2018; Ghosh 2017), our aim is to rethink rural West Africa through what Chappatte coins “lifepace”, a term inspired from the concept of ‘lifeworld’ (Jackson 1996). In this theoretical framework rural West Africa becomes a network of small towns and villages where people’s “lifepace” is a set of connected localities. This “lifepace” approach will especially ask for a multi-sited ethnography (Falzon 2009) because our ethnographic site will be constituted of a set of connected localities whether these connections are concrete, digital, or imaginary.

3.3 Outline of TP3: Rather than putting religious orthodoxy and human freedom in tension, our phenomenological analysis probes a living corporate religiosity whose transformative power emerges in moments framed by ritualized bureaucracy, mundane opportunities, and exclusive identities.

Exploring lives in motion: We will explore the social construction of people’s lives through people’s perceptions of their experiences as they arise (Jackson 1996, Jackson and Piette 2015). The immediacy of these moments does not exclude that these moments are situational, shape longstanding momentums, and can even create new momentums. We will therefore consider people’s perceptual fields as made of two intertwined awareness: (1) the ‘close-up’ of experience, for instance uttering an oath; (2) the ‘horizon’ of experience, for instance the subsequently imprints of this oath over time (Ram and Houston 2015). This phenomenological approach therefore explores lives in immediate motion within lives in wider temporal transformations.

Bureaucracy as ritual, path, and education: We will probe the ways bureaucracy as ritual (e.g. public oath of allegiance to a religious leader of a Muslim organization), path (e.g. career ladder in a Muslim

organization), and education (e.g. continuous training programme offered by a Muslim organization) enters into people's lives and transforms their religious experiences. This phenomenological approach to bureaucracy stresses the transformative power of these specific religious experiences.

Beyond a dichotomous religiosity: While we do acknowledge the relevance to study the authoritative dimension of religious identities and practices (Deeb and Harb 2013; Fadil and Fernando 2015), we want to stress the transformative power of a living religiosity on its actors. We will investigate how and to what extent ritualized bureaucracy, mundane opportunities, and exclusive identities associated with corporate Islam transform its actors in their very experiential moment and through their imprint over times. Our premise is that corporate religiosity is a form of religiosity which is attracting people in rural West Africa because themselves seek to be simultaneously efficient, connected, and collective in their building of a moral, prosperous, and modern life.

laboratory of empathy and writing: By excavating phenomenological research methods (Finlay 2009, Landridge) and their relations to empathy (Throop 2010), our aim is to foster ethnographic writings which are self-reflexive and sincere as well as precise, gripping, and accessible. Our exchanges will be a laboratory for making intimacy permeable, sharpening empathy, and perceiving the experience of others first through the crudity of life before any conceptual thoughts.

4. The research team

Project investigator (PI), month 1 - 60	PhD Student 2 (D2), month 7 - 54
Postdoctoral researcher (PR), month 7 - 42	Student assistant 1 (ST1), month 7 - 18
PhD student 1 (D1), month 7 – 54	Student assistant 2 (ST2), month 31 – 54

North-South and South-North dialogue: The research team (PI, PR, D1, D2) will be composed of two persons of European background and two persons of West African background so as to question the influence(s) of our cultural backgrounds over our ethnographic empathy. PR, D1, and D2 will be selected via an international call for application.

5. Representativeness of the four case studies:

- An organization of Muslim women: *Union des Femmes Musulmanes du Sénégal (UFMS)*

Investigator: PR, or D1, or D2 (TBD)

Ethnographic site: rural areas of Senegal (TBD)

- An organization of Muslim youth of modernist Salafi inspiration: *Muslim Youth League of Nigeria*

Investigator: PR, or D1, or D2 (TBD)

Ethnographic site: the Oyo State (southwest Nigeria)

- A Muslim NGO : *NGO La Bienfaisance, Ivory Coast*

Investigator: PR, or D1, or D2 (TBD)

Ethnographic site: the hinterland of Anyama (20km north of Abidjan); the hinterland of Korhogo.

- An organization of new Sufi inspiration: *Ansar Dine and Ansar Dine International (AD) in Mali and Guinea*

Investigator: PI

Ethnographic site: The Region of Sikasso (southern Mali); the Region of Kankan (northeast Guinea), Bamako.

6. Outline of the scientific work plan + output

Phase 1: Recruitment process and literature review (month 1 -18)

Month 1 - 6: recruitment process + preparation of list of key readings for each thematic perspective (PI)

Month 7 - 18: Literature review: 2 weekly reading groups (TP1 and 2); 1 monthly reading group (TP3)

Month 17 or 18: 2,5 days' workshop on the theme "corporate Islam" (all + external guest speakers)

Output: 2 peer-reviewed collective articles (all; PR +PI): monthly contribution to an internet blog (all in rotation) on TP3

Phase 2: Ethnographic fieldwork (month 19 – 30/42)

Month 19 - 30: Ethnographic fieldwork of D1 and D2 (+ an optional 6 months of extension)

Month 19 - 42: PI and PR can split their ethnographic fieldwork into two to three shorter periods.

Intermediary output: Fieldnotes; Interviews; Visual materials

Phase 3: Writing-up, findings, and outreach (month 31 – 42/54/60)

The writing-up periods of PR (month 31 - 42); D1 and D2 (month 31 - 54); PI (month 31 - 60)

Month 37 - 42: the organization of a collective exhibition (pictures + short filming sequences) at the *Musée d'ethnographie de Genève* (MEG) that puts the four case studies in dialogue (all; more PI, PR)

Month 47 or 48: 2,5 days' workshop on first ethnographic result (all + external guest speakers)

Output: 3 personal peer-reviewed ethnographic articles (D1, D2, PI), 2 peer-reviewed comparative articles on the four case studies (PI); 2 PhD dissertations (D1, D2); 2 monographs (PR, PI); 1 ethnographic film (PI), 1 collective exhibition (all)

7. Ground breaking nature of the project: This ethnographic project will offer the first nuanced, detailed, and actors-centered depictions of the contemporary expansion of corporate Islam in rural West Africa. Through the innovative concept of "lifeplace" it will deepen our understanding of an allegedly distant rural life through an exploration of the growing connectivity (concrete, digital, or imaginary) between small towns and villages with the wider world. By probing to what extent Islam can be the vector of modern bureaucracy in rural West Africa, it will also contribute to closely decode the political stakes and personal aspirations that motivate rural Muslims to get involved and pursue their engagement in corporate Islam. It will consequently contribute to decipher the genuine opportunities, tensions, and changes that connect, mobilize and transform these Muslims who, although they work away from large towns, share with urbanites the fact of living in an era marked by a search for a moral, prosperous, and modern life. The specific representativeness of each of the four case studies will further help us to decode more peculiar stakes in terms of gender, generations, religious allegiances, Islamic developmental issues, and corporative charisma.

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