



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### TRANSNATIONAL RELIGIOUS MOBILITY AND RECONFIGURATION OF THE IVORIAN MUSLIM ASSOCIATIVE FIELD IN FRANCE: A LOOK AT THE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF IVORIANS IN ILE-DE-FRANCE

<sup>1</sup>Konan Vincent KONAN and <sup>2</sup>Diarra Krikou

<sup>1</sup>Associate researcher Laboratoire LAPCOS, Nice, Teacher-Researcher, Félix Houphouët University Boigny/Ivory Coast; <sup>2</sup>Associate Researcher Laboratoire dynamE, Strasbourg, Teacher-Researcher, Felix Houphouët University Boigny/ Ivory Coast

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\*Corresponding author:  
Konan Vincent KONAN

#### ABSTRACT

L'effervescence associative dans la communauté Ivoirienne en Ile-de-France va mettre en saillance des déplacements géographiques des acteurs et des courants religieux, impliquant ainsi une mobilité des pratiques et des symboles religieux entre la Côte d'Ivoire et la France. Ces mobilités religieuses transnationales induisent des enjeux sociaux qui participent de la reconfiguration du champ associatif musulman ivoirien en France en intégrant à juste titre de nouveaux acteurs transnationaux : les leaders religieux "locaux". Ce qui n'est pas sans conséquences dans la construction des rapports sociaux dans le champ associatif musulman des immigrés Ivoirien en région francilienne. L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser les enjeux qui participent de la conquête de l'espace francilien par ces leaders religieux locaux – venant de Côte d'Ivoire – mais également les rapports sociaux concrets (conflictualités, collaborations etc.) entre les associations musulmanes des Ivoiriens en France.

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## INTRODUCTION

Transnational religious mobility has become an increasingly common phenomenon in contemporary societies, particularly in immigrant communities. The Ivorian community in Ile-de-France is no exception to this trend, with geographical movements of actors and religious currents between Ivory Coast and France. If these transnational religious mobilities can contribute to strengthening the links between individuals and communities, they can also generate conflicts and tensions in the social dynamics at stake. So we are led to wonder how transnational religious mobilities can both participate in the reconfiguration of the Ivorian Muslim associative field in France by integrating new transnational actors, but also disturb the balances and social relationships in this associative field, highlighting the complexity of transnational dynamics and their impacts on local dynamics? The objective of this article is thus to analyze the stakes involved in the conquest of Île-de-France by these local religious leaders coming from Côte d'Ivoire, but also the concrete social relationships, conflicts, collaborations, etc., between the Muslim associations of Ivorian immigrants in France.

## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach based on individual and collective interviews was adopted in this study. A total of eighteen (18) research interviews were conducted with Ivorian migrants who are members of religious associations and Seven (7) with religious leaders from Côte d'Ivoire.

In practice, the transcribed interviews were sectioned transversally. The themes of the interview guide were retained as recording units during coding. The analytical categories, in relation to the objectives of the study was built according to a double approach. Some categories were constructed a priori based on the themes of the guide. Others have emerged from the analogical classification of elements not taken into account by the predefined categories. This analysis has led to the following results.

## RESULTS

**Transnational religious mobility and reinvention of religious practices:** Transnational religious mobility is one of the key elements of this study. It manifests itself through geographical movements of actors and religious currents between Côte d'Ivoire and France. This mobility implies a transmission of religious practices and symbols from one country to another, which has consequences on the construction of the religious and cultural identity of Ivorians in France. Religious practices in Ivory Coast have an influence on religious practices in France, and vice versa. Local Ivorian religious leaders come to France to preach and establish contacts with members of the Ivorian community. They also bring with them religious practices and symbols of their country of origin, which may be different from those practiced in France. This transnational religious mobility can also have repercussions on social relations between the different religious groups in France. By observing the religious actors who arrive in Ile de France, we notice a reconfiguration or even a reinvention of religious practice. Indeed, the change of geographical

area and the realities of the environment sometimes force these actors to reorganize themselves to live their religious faith. This sometimes involves a "divinization"<sup>1</sup> of certain parts of their living environment. This divinization is inherent in a difficulty for religious actors to find a place of worship to gather and live their religious faith. Thus, we note in actors a divinization of the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom. etc. According to K.I, this process allows the Muslim to live his faith despite the difficulties « *We have difficulty finding a place to gather, so sometimes for prayers, we pray at home and use specific objects and places to live the relationship with Allah. For example, when you arrive at my place, there is a small one in my living room where I light the incense, there is also the Quran placed. This allows me to feel the presence of the prophet. There are some who use their kitchens or the bathroom to be in permanent contact with Allah* »

As can be seen from the above statements, religious practice can reinvent itself, redefine itself with the realities of the geographical era considered. This redefinition translates into a "divinization" of certain places in the practitioner's home. By doing so, the faithful Muslim maintains his prayer relationship with God. Thus a form of reconfiguration of the religious practice of migrants is born, even bricolage (Diop, 1991). The activity of Muslim religious associations also makes it possible to understand a round trip of religious practices in the Paris context. Indeed, it is here about reading in the activity of new religious actors between an « authenticity » (Bava, 2010) and a form of religious reconfiguration at work. The migration of these new actors is no longer seen as a break but rather as a resource mobilized by these actors to connect two worlds. From this point of view, knowing oneself to "know how to circulate" (Tarrius, 1996) and the connection established by these actors will introduce a new form of rituality in the religious practice of these actors. In the case of Muslim associations, if it is almost difficult for these actors to sometimes gather on Fridays for universal prayer, it is on the occasion of religious events: baby consecration,

Moreover, with the movement of religious actors, there is also a shift in religious currents. Indeed, the migratory movements and cultural exchanges that occur between Côte d'Ivoire and France have favored the spread of religious practices and symbols in the Ivorian community in Ile-de-France. This transnational religious mobility is characterized by geographical movements of religious actors, notably local leaders, which will influence the reconfiguration of the Ivorian Muslim associative field in France. Religious actors, whether they are imams, preachers, community leaders or simple faithful, have diverse motivations that justify the migration project. By embarking on the migration project, some actors seek to broaden their audience, to meet the spiritual needs of their migrant community. The proliferation of places of worship, sometimes informal, shows a desire to spread Muslim ideology in the country. Registered in the Muslim religious currents: Sunni or Shiite, these actors bring with them the doctrines conveyed by these currents. This "transport" of currents and doctrines is also accompanied by rituals that will influence the religious practices of migrant communities. Movements of religious expansion, such as Salafism or Sufism, for example, will participate in the spread of new religious practices and ideologies in the migrant community. in France. In this context of transnational religious mobility, religious actors and religious currents will therefore interact to shape the religious practice of migrant communities in France. This dynamic brings with it important social challenges, both for migrant communities and host societies. It raises questions about the integration of religious practices in secular societies, the coexistence of different religions in the same public space, as well as the relationships between religious communities and state institutions. Another thing that it is important to note here is a form of contextual theology (Bava, 2021), which is invented from the cultural, economic and social context. The context of expression of religious practice and the constraints of the environment gives rise to another form of religious practice

**The new transnational actors, towards a new religious offer:** The arrival and presence of new religious actors in the Paris Region will create a religious dynamic at the level of this region. Having acquired legitimacy in their country of origin, these actors travel with their status, their titles and hope to retain these achievements (legitimacy, prestige, notoriety) on their new space. However, this ambition sometimes seems to meet resistance from existing structures. The new religious actors upon arrival, in the perspective of establishing a certain legitimacy, autonomy and to extend more or less their power, also create associations of new places of prayer and meeting. He: then new places of sociability with a particular dynamic are born. The creation of these new spaces is sometimes accompanied by specific religious discourse. Indeed, they will build themselves as beings to whom the prophet speaks, by doing so, they attract new members to their associations; who will come to grow their association. The arrival of new actors is also seen as an opportunity for Ivorians already living on the ground to sometimes reconnect with the country from the point of view of culture and religious practice. With the presence of new actors, the Paris region will offer itself as a space to conquer in order to establish a form of domination, of conquest. The conquest of Île-de-France by local religious leaders coming from Côte d'Ivoire involves issues and challenges for Muslim associations of Ivorian immigrants in France. The leaders. Local religious are often perceived as new transnational actors in the Ivorian Muslim associative field in France. Their presence calls into question the balance and hierarchy of powers in place, as well as the way in which Muslim associations are organized and operate. With the arrival of the new ones, a religious dynamic will also be created within the groups.

The religious dynamic thus created will be organized around the activities proposed by the different associations. More clearly, associations offering more attractiveness will attract new players to them. Here, it is important to raise an important fact. The new religious actors who for most of the students (Bava, 2010) will organize themselves to create events: seminars, reunions, outings etc. Always with a religious coloration. These events, mostly hosted by the locals, offer a new face to the Muslim religious landscape in Ile-de-France. Moreover, the conquest of Île-de-France by local religious leaders coming from Côte d'Ivoire raises several social issues in the Ivorian Muslim associative field in France. First of all, this implies a reconfiguration of the Muslim associative field in France by integrating new transnational actors. The conquest of Île-de-France by local religious leaders has consequences on social relations within Ivorian communities in France. Indeed, local religious leaders are introducing new models of social relations that induce changes in the way members of Ivorian communities interact with each other.

Among the new actors, there is a form of tutoring to help with the integration of the different members. More clearly, the older ones, those who work supervise the younger ones and sometimes those who do not work. This form of relationship creates a dynamic within the newly formed groups. On this relational model, I.T can testify « *En arrivant ici, on a été pris en charge par nos aînés qui étaient déjà dans l'association. Ils nous ont orienté sur les question administrative, sociale et sur tout religieux. Par exemple, quand tu arrives, on te confie à un grand frère pour les hommes et une grande sœur pour les femmes. Cette personne est sensée te guider, t'orienter dans tes démarches et tes difficultés. En faisant ici, c'est plus facile pour nous. C'est aussi l'une des raisons pour lesquelles on fréquente l'association. Parce qu'on sait qu'un tuteur va nous aider, et ça c'est intéressant de le savoir* » (I.T student in economics).

The above remarks clearly show that the associative environment offers a new relational offer based on tutoring, coaching. What constitutes a novelty in the field car cette organisation au sein des nouveaux acteurs n'existait pas avant dans les associations musulmanes.

**The Muslim associations of Ivorians in France : between collaboration and conflict:** The concrete social relations between Ivorian Muslim associations in France are also affected by the transnational religious mobility of local religious leaders. These

<sup>1</sup> We call divinization, the process by which the faithful Muslim erects certain places of their home as a place of prayer to live an intimacy with Allah.

displacements and this competition for religious legitimacy have consequences on the relations between associations, particularly in terms of collaborations or potential conflicts. At the level of collaboration, let us specify that these actors constitute an economic weight especially for their country of origin. Indeed, they join forces to contribute to the realization of certain projects and thus contribute to the development of their country of origin. Thus these actors join forces for the construction of schools, hospitals, create SME<sup>2</sup>. On these projects, the different associations cooperate and we can see a strong agreement between the different associations. The financial transactions of these actors to their countries of origin constitute an important private investment for the country. On the issue of funding, the association first addresses its members, then subsequently addresses other associations or goes door to door. Another source of funding is for event days, notably the two 'ayds' festivals, or Fridays during prayer. On the political level, the numerical strength of these associations constitutes an electorate "prized" by the country of origin. More clearly, there is a convergence of views on the political question within the Muslim associative structures. They share the same political vision and constitute a database for politics. It should also be noted that internally, one of the collaboration points of Muslim associations remains the organization of marriage and religious festivities, occasions during which actors can share moments of sociability. Regarding weddings, on the occasion of these events, the various officials are invited by the family to attend the ceremonies. The celebration of the country of origin's independence day is also a moment of collaboration. On this occasion, the Muslim associations unite to bring their requests and suggestions to the diplomatic representation of the country. At the macro level, with the Muslim question in France sometimes causing debate, the structures unite to take their path before politics. For example, on the issue of wearing a veil, a bikini and all issues related to Islam in France. For the associative actors, by being united, they manage to bring their path and opinions before the political authorities. Their union constitutes a force of proposition before the political power in France. Although there is a form of collaboration within associations, the fact remains that these places are subject to conflicts. In the Ile-de-France milieu, one can read among religious leaders a struggle for positioning. A positioning that would make them the privileged interlocutor of the state apparatus. Indeed, for the quest for legitimacy, certain associations are rigorous in the face of state discourse. Thus, they receive funding from the French government or even some elected officials. In doing so, these associations are accused by others of 'laxity' and 'selling out'. This situation sometimes generates tensions within the associative entities. Conflicts also arise from the desire of associative actors to become privileged partners of the authorities. These structures thus constitute the main structure with which the authorities communicate. The erection of a particular association as a privileged interlocutor with the authorities creates a sometimes conflicting situation within the associative structures. Which weakens the associative fabric of the Ile-de-France region. In the expression of religious faith, these new transnationals are perceived as competitors by the Muslim associations established in France, who feel threatened in their legitimacy and influence. The arrival of these 'local' religious and their impact on social relations within the Ivorian Muslim associative field in France will lead to changes, disorganizations of the established order, even tensions with religious leaders and existing associations. The integration of these new players into existing associations will bring an air of novelty, dynamism in the associations. Thus new forms of solidarity will be born, the formation of small nuclei, new forms of relationships. If these elements ring out for the new people as a way of living the religious faith and integrating into society, this will lead to tensions within the groups considered.

## DISCUSSION

At the end of the 1980s, Domenach and Pichouet (1980) saw in the migration issue a reversible character. Indeed, they proposed to read in the migratory fact several facts that to see it as a "change of residence"

(Domenach, 1980: 1). Even today, the migration issue fuels discussions and raises various issues. In France, if the question of migration has sometimes been mixed with the question of secularism translated into analyses of "ethnic minorities" (bava, 2010), the analysis of the migration issue imposes a paradigm shift. If migration sometimes involves deterritorialized imaginaries (Appadurai, 2001) because elsewhere does not necessarily involve a journey, a geographical distance (Fouquet, 2007). In this reflection, we set out to propose a reflection on religious migration from Muslim religious associations in Ile de France. One of the first results we have achieved is that migrants, upon arriving on French soil, reinvent their religious practice. By considering religious practice, which is akin to a religious bricolage as a response to their particular social condition, we thus join Principe (2012) who questions religion as an element of social cohesion for migrants in reaching this conclusion. On the question of reinvented religion in a migratory context, bava (2010) reached the same conclusion from his study entitled « *The new religious figures of African migration in Cairo* ».

Another thing, let us note if the first candidates for migration were generally religious guides sometimes persecuted in their different countries and whose migratory project sounds like a quest for security, the religious actors studied as part of this reflection are mostly young candidates for university projects, and who upon arrival turn into a religious actor. These new actors will bring dynamism and enthusiasm to the religious field in the French-speaking area. This is what emerges from our result N°2, on this question we join (Bava, 2010) from his work on « the new figures of religious migration in Cairo ». This new category of religious actors will bring momentum to the 'religious market' existing through the organization of activities, a new relational dynamic (mentoring). If within associative structures, one can sometimes read visible collaborations by the organization of activities like both « ayids », the reception proposed by the diplomatic authorities on the occasion of the celebration of the independence of Côte d'Ivoire, the arrival of new actors is still not well received within Muslim associations in Ile-de-France; sometimes giving rise to frustrations, tensions. The existing conflictuality in the Muslim associative environment was highlighted by the Parisian daily newspaper in its publication of July 17, 2019. Still in this dynamic, Boyer (1998) emphasized the sometimes conflictual that taint the relationship between the major Muslim associations. These two texts join our result N°3 which analyzes the collaboration and the conflictual framework within associations. Overall, the question of religious migration remains a heuristic field and the reflection proposed here remains vast. It intends to open up reflection on the new configuration of the Muslim associative field in Ile-de-France because the migratory issue.

## CONCLUSION

The question of religious migration arises today in many disciplines as a rather dynamic heuristic field. In France particularly, studies have focused more on the religious identity of the migrant than on the migratory journey Bava, 2010 : 3). Moreover, after studies on the conditions of adaptation of migrant workers (Kuczynski et al, 2009), reflections in sociology will seek to question the religion of the migrant (Bava, 2010). The first studies on the question of migrants were then conducted (Barou, 1978 ; Diop, 1989 ; Quinimal, 1991). Even today, the religious question in France raises a political issue: the question of secularism. The political debate at this level seems biased and focuses more on the analysis of religious minorities rather than on the analysis of possible forms of secularism (bauberot, 1994). By engaging in this reflection, we wanted to participate in the reflection on the migration issue by analyzing the religious practice of Ivorian Muslim associations in Ile-de-France. Examining the angle of analysis proposed by the various works on the religious practices of migrants in France from the 1990s onwards. These are mainly the works of (Geisser, 2001; Bava, 2002 ; Kuczynski, 2002 ; Fancello, 2005). From the data collected from religious actors of Muslim associations in Ile-de-France, it is worth noting the following.

<sup>2</sup> small and medium enterprise

It can be seen at the level of associations that there is transnational religious mobility and reinvention of religious practices. Indeed, in the religious practice observed among the actors studied, one can read a "divinisation" of certain places in their home. This practice allows them to get closer to Allah and fully live their religious faith. It is mainly the living room, the bathroom, and the lit incense in these rooms to reproduce the intimacy experienced in prayer places at the time of large sessions of prayers. This is inherent in the fact that it is sometimes difficult for our interviewees to find a place (Mosque, space of conviviality) to listen to the messenger of Allah. Next to this, there is also a new category of religious actors within associations: the new transnational actors. With the arrival of new actors and the various activities developed, we note the birth of a new figure of Muslim associations in Ile-de-France. Concretely, upon arriving in the region, these new actors in search of legitimacy and notoriety will develop a range of activities to build a new figure of the faithful Muslim. Thus activities such as "the night of the Quran", "the evening of solidarity" will be born which allow these new actors to attract new members for their associations. This technique seems to work well because from these activities, we notice a widening of the size of certain Muslim associations. On the other hand, the system of tutoring set up in these structures constitutes a real renewal in the milieu. These activities and provisions create a form of dynamic within the associations and gives rise to a real market for religion which has become competitive in Ile-de-France.

If one can sometimes read a collaboration between associative entities observable during ceremonies such as baby baptisms, the two 'ayds', translated by the common organization of so-called active ones, there are no cases of conflict in these places. Between the associations that manage to constitute themselves as the main interlocutors of the authorities and the others, tensions are sometimes observed. Moreover, from the dynamics created by associations, especially those newly established and those existing for a long time, tensions, frustrations arise and sometimes call upon the intervention of the authorities. These conflicts weaken the associative relational fabric in Ile-de-France and offer a not sufficiently interesting spectacle of the Muslim religious universe in Ile-de-France. In any case, if the question of religious migration has been assimilated to the question of secularism (bava, 2010) in France, it today imposes a change of discourse, of perspective with regard to the all-round dynamics that it offers.

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