Religious Pluralism and Secularism between Senegal and France: A View from Senegalese Families in France

*Etienne Smith*

**Introduction**

Senegal’s model of religious pluralism and passive secularism (Kuru, 2007) has been extensively studied (Villalón, 1995; Ndiaye, 2002; Cruise O’Brien, 2003; Loimeier, 2009; Diouf, 2013; Smith, 2013) and increasingly so in a comparative perspective (Bayart, 2010; Villalón, 2010; Stepan, 2011). Religious transnationalism of Senegalese migrants has also attracted a lot of attention (Diouf, 2000; Riccio, 2004; Kane, 2011). At the same time, France’s secularism has been recently revisited, especially with respect to the accommodation of Islam, now France’s second largest religion (Bowen, 2009) and the expanding literature on Muslims in Europe (Moodood et al., 2006). However, the comparative study of the Senegalese and the French models where they intersect in concrete ways, i.e. in the lives of Senegalese migrants in France, has not been systematically carried out for the contemporary period. Moreover, migrants are in fact probably the best comparative thinkers (Riccio, 2004). Studying their comparative views on both the homeland’s and the host country’s secularism can help us rethink each in the light of the other. Senegal is an overwhelmingly Muslim country (95%) with a Christian minority (5%), while France, with a historically Christian majority (45%), has a large non-religious population (45%), and an important Muslim minority (8%).

This essay focuses on the views that members of a sample of transnational Senegalese families hold about religious pluralism and secularism. It is based on an ethnographic study and semi-formal interviews carried out in 2008–2009 among around 20 families near Paris, Lyon, Nantes and Rouen. Its goal was to assess the resilience or alteration across generations of practices and views on secularism and religious pluralism. Since most studies of Senegalese migrants

1 For estimations for France, see Beauchemin, Hamel and Simon (eds) 2010, p. 124. Orthodoxs, Jews, Buddhists and others were 0.5% each.

2 I am grateful to David Laitin, director of the ‘Muslims Integration into EU Societies’ project (funded by his U.S. based National Science Foundation Grant SES-0819635), within which this study took place, for making this fieldwork possible, and to Jørgen Nielsen, Martha Fredericks,
in France have focused on the overwhelmingly Muslim Soninke, Haalpulaaren, or Wolof, or on the overwhelmingly Christian Manjak, I have focused mainly on families from Serer and Jola backgrounds, often left out of the picture because of their relative small numbers in France. This was all the more interesting as these two milieus are the most religiously mixed, including the internal sphere of the families. Inter-religious accommodations, transformations or tensions could thus be analyzed within intimate spaces like families and not only as external interactions with the host society and its institutions.

First, presenting some family configurations I encountered, I argue that the Senegalese legacy of religious pluralism and secularism has proven to be enduring among the Senegalese families in France, both in terms of beliefs and practices. Second, I highlight some of the transformations nonetheless taking place in the French contexts and the growing gaps these create between the second generation and newer migrants. Finally, I discuss the shifts in the respective status of the Senegalese Catholics and Muslims in the French context, and the complex interplay of this majority/minority inversion with racialisation. In particular, I try to interpret the complex situation of Senegalese Muslims in France, as they negotiate their identities between a double invisibility and a double burden as Blacks and Muslims, and practice their ‘agency in tight corners’ (Lonsdale, 2000).

**Pluralist Families and Comparative Thinkers**

For the purpose of this study, I decided to focus on two aspects of Senegal’s manifold configuration of religious pluralism. First, pluralism ‘from below’, that is religious pluralism at the grassroots, within families and in daily lives. Religiously mixed-families are not uncommon in Senegal.\(^3\) Whether a cause or a consequence of religious tolerance, inter-religious accommodation starts within intimate institutions like the family. Have Senegalese families been able

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3 Despite the absence of reliable data on this issue, inter-faith marriages and personal choices of faith inside the family – though sometimes fiercely opposed by the families – are commonly seen in Senegal and are thus not a result of the new French context. A small survey (n = 338) I carried out in 2006 in the Dakar region, shows that, even beyond the specificities of the religiously mixed Jola or Serer areas, kin networks and circles of sociability are religiously diverse: 68% of Catholics respondents had Muslim kin, and 100% had Muslim friends,