Religion, Ethnicity and Transnational Migration between West Africa and Europe: An Epilogue

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Introduction

One and a half decades have passed since Gerrie Ter Haar in her book *Halfway to Paradise* drew attention to a group of people that researchers had tended to overlook: African Christian migrants in Europe (Ter Haar, 1998, 4–5). Since then, a wealth of mainly ethnographic material has been published, mapping and describing the width of African Christianity in Europe (Adogame and Weissköppel, 2005; Adogame, Gerloff and Hock, 2008; Währisch-Oblau, 2009; Simon 2010; Ludwig and Asamoah-Gyadu, 2011; Adogame, 2012).

However, while Ter Haar’s observation brought about extensive research into African Christian migrants and their religious communities, another group of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa still remains underexposed. Muslim migrants from sub-Saharan Africa – and in particular West Africa – seem to suffer from what Etienne Smith in this volume has called a ‘double invisibility’: they remain invisible within the wider African community that has been conceptualized by the general public as ‘Christian’, as well as within the wider Muslim community that has been conceptualized as being from North African or Middle Eastern or (in the case of UK) Asian descent. This double invisibility may to some extent explain the near absence of West African Muslim migrants to Europe from academic research. This volume has brought together contributions that address various aspects of West African Muslim migrants in Europe.

West African Islam, heavily influenced by colonial representations based on the work of Paul Marty (Marty, 1917) has in academic and colonial discourses been construed as an irenic form of Islam. Black Islam (*l’islam noir*) is usually represented as a peaceful Sufi Islam that is accommodative and tolerant of

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2 Gina Smith in her contribution refers to the work of Talal Asad who has pointed out that the colonial construct of *l’islam noir* served to reinforce colonial constructions of Arab Islam as violent. Etienne Smith, in his contribution to this book, affirms that the academic and
other religious traditions; its members are thought to maintain cordial relations with non-Islamic religious communities and individuals. One of the leading queries of this book project has been investigating how West African Muslims, often conversant with living in religiously plural contexts, interact with the European context, and whether, and if so how, migration impacts these perceived congenial patterns of interreligious relating, both in destination countries as well as – through a feedback loop – in the countries of origin.

This epilogue tries to tease out some overarching observations about these two topics. First, it explores patterns of self-representation of West African Muslims in Europe, paying specific attention to the role of religion and ethnicity. Second, it examines the impact of migration on patterns of interreligious relating both in the new migration context and – where material is available – also in the context of origin.

Migration, Ethnicity and Religion

Migration is by no means a new phenomenon to West Africans. Travel, religious pilgrimage, nomadic existence and trek have always been part of the West African way of life. From the Dyula merchants trading in gold, slaves and kola-nuts to the Fulani herdsmen in search of greener pastures for their cattle, from the Jakhanke scholars journeying to propagate Islam to 18th century West African youths travelling to Europe for education, mobility has been a prominent feature of West African societies throughout the centuries.

In more recent times, with the enforcement of borders and an emphasis on national identities, traditional itinerant existence has been under strain (Lindijer, 2005). Yet, in times of economic recession, natural disasters or political instability, many West Africans still turn to mobility as an obvious way to improve their life-conditions. At times this mobility takes the form of migration within the region (Stock, 2013, 262–281). But West Africans have also looked beyond the region for new opportunities. Until recently for example, Libya was an important destination country for West African labour migrants. Since the mid-twentieth century there have also been substantial groups of West Africans leaving the African continent, migrating to Europe, North America and the Gulf region in search of a better future. José van Santen in her contribution calls attention to Fulani wodaabe women from Niger, who were at