Sensitising gender to local cosmology:
A participatory ethnographic gender and development approach from a Muslim community in Senegal

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Abstract: *This article is concerned with the effectiveness of gender and development practice in diverse knowledge systems. Conventional theoretical and analytical frameworks and methodologies of gender and development reflect primarily secular epistemologies and it has yet to be addressed systematically how non-secular knowledge systems may be incorporated effectively in the design and implementation of gender programmes. This article presents a project from a Muslim rural community of Senegal that analysed gender realities through the prism of the local religio-cultural cosmology and explored community members' responses to increasingly internationalised western ideals of gender equality. As an innovative methodology, participatory research techniques were integrated into short-term ethnographic investigations in an attempt to explore gender realities through the conceptual repertoire of the research participants. The study showed that understandings of subjectivity and gender norms were intertwined intricately with religio-cultural beliefs which influenced how participants conceived themselves and local gender relations and how they responded to western ideals of gender equality. Gender itself seemed to be conceptualised at a more profound ontological level emanating from religio-cultural beliefs. The implication is that gender-sensitive development in this community will need to account for this epistemological framework and to attune to religio-cultural sensibilities. The study also suggests that the participatory ethnographic methodology that was employed can facilitate a transition to an epistemology-sensitive gender and development practice; however it must be combined with reflexivity and be followed by more rigorous research.*

Key Terms: Gender and Development │Gender Equality │Religious Cosmology │Non-secular Epistemologies │Participatory Ethnographic Research │ Islam

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Introduction

Traditionally, few gender and development scholars treated religious beliefs and spiritual experience as a layer of human socialisation that needed to be embedded in the analysis of gender realities (Sweetman 1998; VerBeek 2000). In general, if religion was considered, this was usually in "a negative way" (Berkley Center for Religions 2008: 21). Even fewer considered the fact that local societies of development practice were likely embedded in distinct religio-cultural cosmologies[1] and socio-cultural realities that could have required analysing gender relations through culture-specific "knowledge and justified belief" (Steup 2014; Nnaemeka 1998; Steady 2005) to inform gender and development programming.

While more recent studies within gender and development have become more accommodating to socio-cultural differences, not least due to the progress of feminist theory in the West, and have incorporated religious parameters in new and complex ways,[2] their empirical findings do not appear to have led to a systematic revision of the more profound epistemological grounds that generally underpin gender and development programmes (Tomalin 2007: 1; Istratii 2017). A review of prominent gender and development

theoretical thinking (Whitehead 1979; Batliwala 1994; Kabeer 1994; Baden and Goetz 1998; Kabeer 1999b; Reeves and Baden 2000; Parpart, Rai and Staudt 2002; Momsen 2004; Batliwala 2010; Kabeer 2011; Cornwall 2016) makes evident that these have been consistently embedded in secular epistemology and mainstreamed gender metaphysics (as these evolved overtime),[3] which raises questions about their appropriateness in non-secular knowledge systems where gender metaphysics are expected to be embedded in very different cosmologies. The same can be said about the analytical frameworks that have been historically used in global practice for 'gender programming' or 'gender mainstreaming' (Overholt et al. 1985; Parker 1993; Moser 1993; Kabeer1999a; March, Smyth, and Mukhopadhyay 1999; UNDP 2001; Mukhopadhyay and Wong 2007: 18). Evidence has emerged to suggest that the western gender ideals such frameworks have been premised on might not align well with the belief and value systems of all local communities, resulting in gender initiatives being rejected (such as the case of CEDAW domestication in Nigeria; see Para-Mallam et al. 2011).

In parallel, as Romina Istratii (2018) recently noted, "the western epistemological tendency of demarcating

spheres of human existence, such as secular/religious, public/private and reason/faith (as observed in Rakodi 2011), persists and impedes a genuine effort to understand religio-cultural cosmologies within their own epistemological boundaries and ontological underlayer." Thus, the issue is not only that gender is not being analysed and theorised from within the local cosmological framework, but also that when religio-cultural parameters are considered, these might not eschew being conceptualised through theoretical typologies that emanate from what is an inherently western epistemological framework.

This argument was developed more thoroughly by Istratii (2017) in another paper that outlined how three mainstream concepts employed in the field of gender and development—gender, gender equality and empowerment—remain embedded in secular epistemology and western metaphysics of gender that could be irrelevant or unhelpful in contexts that do not espouse such an epistemological system. Istratii defined epistemology as "the criteria and sources for valid knowledge *as related to a specific cosmology* […] under the understanding that individuals become conscious agents within specific belief systems where they acquire the tools and standards for reasoning" (2017: 4). She aimed to establish that all individuals are epistemologically situated and that this epistemology is usually intertwined with the cosmologies that individuals espouse and have reasons to value. Istratii called for more practitioner reflexivity about epistemological positionality and the need to put more effort in reconstructing and analysing cross-cultural gender systems through local knowledge frameworks and conceptual repertories to instruct gender and development programming.

This paper presents a development-oriented research approach from Senegal that considered the aforementioned theoretical lacunae and attempted to prioritise the local religio-cultural system in gender analysis through the employment of an innovative conceptual and methodological approach. This aimed to: a) account for the epistemological positionality of the practitioner critically, b) to ensure the inclusion of authoritative male-dominated institutions in the analysis of gender relations and women's realities, and c) to enable a more human-centred approach to gender and development research that could capture better local worldviews—in particular the interplay of religious beliefs and gender normative systems.

In what follows, the background and aims of the project are first described. I then discuss how I attempted to address some of the challenges associated with the epistemological situatedness of the practitioner that were observed by Istratii in her paper. The participatory ethnographic methodology employed is outlined in the next section, which is followed by a presentation of the

local gender analysis. A concluding section summarises the study findings and draws implications for local gender-sensitive development.

A different project
The research described in this article was conducted in the village of Guédé Chantier in northern Senegal. Correspondence with the local Mayor in 2013 suggested the existence of persistent gender asymmetries in local livelihoods that sought to be addressed in ways that incorporated and prioritised local religio-cultural sensibilities. This raised the idea to combine participatory and ethnographic methods to investigate local gender realities while accounting for authoritative religio-cultural traditions. A parallel interest was to investigate the intersection of normative gender ideals and globalised (western) norms of gender equality in order to understand how mainstreamed gender and development approaches might fare in the local society and how they might be adapted to become more relevant and effective to local sensibilities. The project was positively received by the Mayor and was granted funding by the Tokyo Foundation in the summer of 2014. It was combined with year-long Master's studies at the Institute of Development Studies (UK) and underwent ethnical review according to the standards of the university. The fieldwork for the project extended over 30 days, with three different trips to the village over the course of one year. This duration reflected both the limited resources I had at my disposal and also my conscious decision to explore if a nuanced analysis could be achieved in a short period of time, making it a feasible option for gender and development practitioners who are usually constrained in terms of time and resources.

Senegal, more broadly, displayed a number of characteristics that made it necessary to embed such a gender analysis within the local religio-cultural framework and to account simultaneously for secular influences. Numerous studies from Senegal have described Islam as an influential force pervading all social, cultural and political life (Villalón 1995; Callaway and Creevey 1989). Simultaneously, Senegal is a secular state and this has affected gender realities in substantive ways. The Family Code, introduced in 1972, was conceived to a large extent under the influence of the secular French model of individual rights (Mbow 2008). Furthermore, in 2010 Senegal passed a historical parity law according to which political parties must ensure that at least half of their candidates in local and national elections are female (Sow 2014). Given this interface of secularism and religiosity, made increasingly uneasy by revivalist Islamist forces, gender practitioners operating in Senegal have preferred to take nuanced approaches attuned to local religious institutions, leveraging simultaneously on secular feminist discourse (Latha 2010; Sow 2014; CODESRIA 2015; Gaestel 2014). My supposition was that any gender-related programme within Senegal would have to account for

the coexistence of religious influences with the rising salience of secular values and discourses.

Addressing epistemological and methodological concerns

As Istratii (2017) observed in her article, practitioners are epistemologically situated and should recognise that this may influence the analytical and theoretical framework through which they come to appraise the realities of men and women in different cultural contexts. In reference to this recognition, throughout the research process I made it a priority to remain conscious of my identity as an Eastern European woman of a religious (Christian Orthodox) background and to suspend assumptions that could reflect my own epistemological and cosmological background. Although I had spent the year prior to this research in four sub-Saharan African countries conducting gender-related investigations,[4] I admitted my unfamiliarity with the faith of Islam and the Senegalese context and recognised my power as a (white) researcher; I made it a primary concern of mine to suspend prejudgments to the best of my ability. The few theoretical premises I did consider emanated from my review of relevant literatures on Senegal, gender, Islam, and African epistemologies, as well as my own religious experience, which informed my thinking about choice of methodology.

A first point of departure for designing this project was that gender relations are the effect of distinct socio-cultural and historical conditions in any given context and should not be preconceived on the basis of some standard criteria, such as biological anatomies or sexual orientation, modes that reflect western feminist thought and its evolution within secular epistemology, but as a result of a closer look at human subjectivities holistically within the local knowledge system.[5] Furthermore, it was understood that all normative systems, including gender identities, are socially and discursively perpetuated, and therefore they must intertwine in intricate ways with broader cosmologies and value systems. Ultimately, such premises raised the need to investigate for this particular community religious knowledge, human subjectivities and normative gender arrangements interdependently.[6] Since this was understood to be a broadly gender-segregated society whereby male-dominated institutions held an authoritative role in society, it was important to take an inclusive approach that would engage with both men and women, especially males who enforced authoritative belief systems, such as religio-cultural leaders.

In view of these understandings, an ethnographic, exploratory approach was considered be the most appropriate methodology. However, as it was said, a rigorous ethnographic study was neither practically feasible nor the primary objective of this project. The main concern was to identify a more participatory, community-based method of gender analysis that could attune the researcher-practitioner to the worldviews of the research participants within a shorter period of time. Simultaneously, it was recognised that ethnography, being a fundamentally subjective project, does not avoid epistemological limitations as outlined in this paper (Clifford 1986; Keesing et al. 1987; Spickard and Landres 2002: 84). In response to these constraints and priorities, it was decided to combine participatory and ethnographic research methods which could offer a better platform for me to improve my reflexivity and for the participants to assume the role of cultural analysts.[7] As a strategy, I first identified appropriate language and conceptual frameworks in initial ethnographic activities with local women and men and then employed these in the design of the participatory methods at a later stage.

Throughout the research, I generally avoided predefining concepts and suggesting demarcations such as 'culture' or 'religion' on the understanding that in rural communities religious beliefs and cultural norms tend to intertwine and need to be explored as such. Interestingly, as I will explain, my interlocutors did conceive the terms as distinct at some analytical level, but for reasons that are very specific to their cosmology and societal conditions. Similarly, I did not define for my interlocutors western ideals of gender equality, but explored what foreign gender norms they had been exposed to through previous development programmes, new technologies and other means. In general, however, when research participants spoke about gender equality norms they associated those with the West, echoing mainstreamed definitions of equality premised on principles of sameness: same rights, opportunities and valuations for both men and women (Reeves and Baden 2000: 2; Cornwall 2016). It is also noteworthy that in the final presentation of the research I chose to present local gender realities as they were conveyed by the participants, prior to providing a more interpretative analysis.

Despite such considerations, it should be recognised that the study remained limited in many ways. For example, while French, which I spoke with fluency, was the language of education locally, the indigenous Peul language prevailed among the older generations, and this I studied only superficially prior to fieldwork. Furthermore, the time spent in the field was limited and therefore the project could not investigate substantively human behaviour in every-day life to draw associations with the wider religio-cultural cosmology. The analysis had to rely primarily on the articulations of the research participants, and this can misguide since what people say does not reflect always what people think and do. Besides, it is only to be apprehended that the identity and positionality of the researcher will mediate participants' communication tactics and answers, which could misguide further research-related conclusions.

Furthermore, participatory research techniques in themselves are no panacea since they remain power-

laden and can be exclusionary (Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2003). The researcher should always be reflexive of the power imbalances both between researcher and participants and among participants and must heed how participants' articulations and discourses reflect their social context and configuration within the group. In addition, these methods' effectiveness is predicated on the trust that is established between the researcher and the community (Bergold and Thomas 2012), which might not be easy to achieve, especially within short periods of interaction. Ultimately, the potential of such methods depends on the demeanour, attitude and attentiveness displayed by the researcher throughout all research stages.

Methods for gender analysis on the ground

Ethnographic methods in this study included structured interviews with female- and male-headed households, personal unstructured interviews with individual men and women, consultations with key village informants and participation and observation. Participatory tools included an all-female and an all-male focus group discussion (FGD), a gender-mixed participatory workshop with community members and a group meeting with male religio-cultural leaders. In selecting research methods I aimed to explore as many facets of local reality as possible. While each method was selected to yield specific types of information, most of the data collected were cross-validated due to overlapping themes. Similarly, in recruiting participants my aim was to capture as many perspectives as I could across gender, cultural, social, economic, political, and other lines of difference. The total number of participants was N=75, which included numerous follow-up individual interviews with workshop and FGD participants (see Table 1). Consent was obtained verbally in all cases, except for household interviews where participants filled in a form. In all other cases I committed to anonymous testimonies unless interviewees had a prominent role that would identify them.

Table 1: *Number, age and gender of participants according to research activity*

Method	Number	Age Range	Women	Men
Key informant consultations	9	not asked	1	8
Household questionnaires	12*	20-68 (women) 29-61 (men)	7	7
Focus group discussions	15	28-60 (women) 18-28 (men)	8	7
Participatory workshop	21	18-45 (mixed)	8	13
Individual interviews	7	not asked	6	1
Meeting with religio-cultural leaders	9	Elders	-	9
Total	**75**	-	**30**	**45**

*In one case both spouses were present and in another case two wives married to the same man responded together, which means that the total number of questionnaires is two less than people interviewed.

During fieldwork I lived at the parental house of the former village mayor,[8] which was comprised of three generations, including a polygamous couple with children. The time outside of research activities was spent observing the rhythm of their daily life, power dynamics in conversations that unfolded around me and patterns of spousal communication. I also had the opportunity to participate in various village activities, including religious celebrations, a community event on gender equity organised by a local youth group with a male leader and a local wedding. In addition, I visited a nearby town and the capital city a couple of times to obtain some more comparative insights.

For the research, I first completed consultations with key informants, who included the former mayor of the village, members of the local council and a few religious leaders. These provided me with some knowledge of the local history, customary norms and community life and insights into the attitudes of the more prominent groups in terms of normative gender arrangements. In parallel, I held structured interviews with household representatives (men and women) to obtain an insight into livelihoods and the extent of gendered organisation within the home. I reached households with the help of two local assistants and by walking around the village alone, making a conscious attempt to speak both to males and females in both monogamous and polygamous marriages across different social classes. I generally spoke to the spouse who was present and never to both simultaneously. Younger married people and most adults spoke perfect French and this gave me considerable independence. For communicating with the older generation and some religio-cultural leaders, who spoke primarily Peul, I used the help of a (female or male) assistant recruited locally.

At a later stage I held focus group discussions (FGDs) with men and women, which aimed to flesh out local gender norms and standards of behaviour and the effect of religio-cultural beliefs on their socialisation. I reasoned that the FGDs' interactive manner could achieve relatively in-depth, nuanced information despite the possibility of self-censorship (Krueger and Casey 2009). FGDs were largely unstructured, although a topic guide that included themes identified in the previous ethnographic activities was used for guidance. I met the young men in a private room and the women on a rooftop which provided some privacy from young children and men. Young male participants were recruited with the help of one of my male assistants. Female participants of diverse ages were recruited with the help of a young woman whom I had established close relations with at the village.[9] Each FGD was conducted primarily in French, lasted a little over one hour and was tape-recorded with the permission of all participants.

The participatory workshop was organised when the other activities were completed. The workshop was announced with the help of local assistants as an open event, extended over two days and included both men and women of different ages, marital status and literacy

levels.[10] These public workshops are generally thought to be useful for capturing normative ideals and codes as opposed to individual positions and attitudes, which would emerge better from life-based interviews (Price and Hawkins 2002: 1358; Elmusharaf et al. 2017). Therefore, the workshop was employed to capture more general beliefs, norms and practices in the local society regarding gender relations and other facets of life, while their interactive nature was expected to reveal a more nuanced picture of the actualities on the ground. Inter alia, participants were invited to share their conceptualisations of development and their knowledge of local livelihoods, religious institutions, community values, gender ideals and norms, socialisation patterns, marriage norms and spousal expectations and even their understandings of healthy relationships. Recognising my epistemological authority, I stressed repeatedly before and during the workshop that this was aimed to serve as a platform for mutual learning. I often shared my own religio-cultural experiences and insights to stimulate more nuanced discussions. The workshop was designed to be interactive and to rely on visual materials so that those who were less literate or illiterate could also participate to some degree.[11] Mapping techniques, Venn diagrams, history timelines, livelihoods tables and drawings were all used.[12] The workshop was in French and was tape-recorded with the permission of the participants.

The last main component was a meeting with religious and cultural leaders and elders, organised during the second visit to the village. It has been postulated that within Sufi Islam *marabouts* initiate disciples and influence local politics and society (Villalón 1995; Masquelier 2009: 1-2) and it seemed appropriate to investigate if their opinions were reflected in the public's views by examining their own stance on gender ideals. To organize the meeting, a local male assistant called on the phone religio-cultural leaders and elders and invited them on my behalf. By this time most leaders were familiar with the nature of my project and attended the meeting. As it was expected, religio-cultural leaders were not immune to power politics and during the meeting some individuals dominated and some remained silent. This imbalance was partially redressed in more personal interviews with some of the attendants.

Finally, some life-based interviews were held with both female and male interlocutors with whom I became close throughout fieldwork and who communicated easily in French (one in English). These interviews added important insight into the more private attitudes, stances and concerns of unique men and women.

Results from the study
Guédé Chantier is located on the Fouta Toro north of Senegal not far from the Senegal River. It has a population of about 7,000 with many more located in satellite villages. The community was established in 1933 by the French who started an irrigated agriculture project, resettling some 50 families to the area to grow rice (PIC 2011-2016). The farming opportunities eventually attracted a large number of other peoples, among them Fulani (or Peul in French) pastoralists, transforming Guédé into a multi-cultural society. However, the majority are Haalpulaaren (literally, "those who speak Pulaar") which explains the dominant Peul culture.[13] The local population belongs unanimously to one of the four most prominent Muslim brotherhoods in Senegal, the Tidjaniya, which belongs to the mystical branch of Sufi Islam.[14] The Tidjanis share the conviction that living life as the Prophet did can more effectively enable Muslims to gain a place in paradise.[15]

Guédé livelihoods are organized by social castes. The local "nobles" are those who lead the prayers and local ceremonies and are known as *Torobe*. Local leaders postulated that the *Torobe* were among the first to be Islamised and to obtain education in the Qur'an, which may explain the prestige attributed to this group locally. Then follow the blacksmiths (within which caste also belong the woodcutters, known as *Laobe*), the fishermen, the agriculturalists and finally the former "slaves." Although livelihoods in Guédé differ by caste, these are mostly sedentary and agricultural (with some transhumance still taking place). Daily activities are generally organised according to gender. In a relevant workshop exercise, participants listed agriculture, animal farming and marketing as work done both by men and women, but attributed household work exclusively to women and artisanal activities (masonry and carpentry) to men. Female participants added a number of other female-only activities, including dressmaking, hair plaiting and transformation of raw food-stuffs into marketable items for selling. The listed allocation of tasks was validated during household interviews, but exceptions were reported, with some local women insisting that in certain homes men did most of the housework.

Marriage as the foundation of everyday life
In this Peul society marriage is a central institution of everyday life and is governed by strong gendered norms. It was explained to me that a wife is called *jomsudu*, which translates as the 'owner of the room.' The room is where one stores one's treasure, food reserves and where one makes important decisions. The husband, in turn, is known as *jomgalle* which translates as the 'owner of the compound.' The compound is made of different *sudu* (rooms, roofs). This reflects a societal arrangement whereby men are responsible to protect and to provide for the women and the children in their house, while women are responsible for family life within the compound. This seems to echo a married man's observation that one must marry early because "the woman is the centre of life. Without the woman, there is no family." (1 January 2015). The former mayor of the village insisted that, "The people who pull the strings however are the women. The

women manage the food income, the resources and make decisions." (29 June 2015). For this reason, the *jomgalle* cannot lend materials and utensils that women work with, and conventionally if someone asks to borrow those, he will direct them to his *jomsudu*. Normatively, in her house a woman has autonomy despite her dependence on the husband for provision of resources.

When participants were invited to reflect on their perceptions around marriage and how these had been formed at home, in school and in religious education, most agreed that at home they had learned to view marriage as sacred and essential for the preservation of caste, in secular school they had been introduced to ideas of marriage as a mutual choice founded on love and intimacy, while within "religion" they saw it as sacred union, in which women were expected to submit to their husbands. Discussions and interviews showed religious conceptions to be the most influential, although not everyone shared the same interpretations. Most male participants echoed a 39-year old woman in a household interview who exclaimed that, "Marriage is a religious custom and must be preserved. It is an institution for bringing children to the world." (1 January 2015). There were however many other believers who conceived marriage as an intimate union of love. An elderly woman insisted during a casual conversation that marriage could happen even if the couple was unable to have children, proposing adoption as solution. This must be a remarkable comment, considering that having children is vital in both Islamic cosmology and Fulani culture (see also Riesman 1977: 42-44). Ideals of love and intimacy were again pronounced in a workshop exercise in which male and female participants designated an overlapping "space" in the separate lives of men and women, in which spouses reportedly came together to share their concerns about the education of children and household affairs and to communicate with each other. Participants used the term "complementarity" to describe the spousal relationship, which they premised ideally on communication, love, mutual respect and reciprocity.

In Guédé, polygamy is prevalent, but this need not be equated categorically with a lack of choice for women. In a casual conversation with a group of five women, I was told that wives can negotiate with their husbands to safeguard their interests as married women before the marriage takes place. It was postulated that men usually honour the commitment due to family/social pressure. Furthermore, according to local custom *("coutume")*, the first wife is considered the mother of the other women. The principal Imam of the community probably captured the complexity of polygamous marriages best when he said that polygamy can be a "divine blessing" for those women who can accept other wives, but it can become a true challenge for those "who cannot accept such an arrangement."(1 April 2015). As if to echo this, a woman of 26 observed that, "Polygamous marriages often serve opposite to the objectives of Islam.

Polygamous marriages encourage competition among wives, wives start to lie, to be jealous of each other, all sins that are not allowed in Islam."(28 March 2015). Although all women agreed that men are allowed to have up to four wives, most also argued that if men cannot fulfil expectations toward their wives as stated in the Qur'an, they should marry only one woman. Despite such critiques, a female research participant of 45 expressed a widespread view when she opined that "marriage is destiny, it comes from God, and is until the end." (1 April 2015). While the polygamous nature of marriage was being increasingly debated among local women, this faith-based understanding did not appear to be openly questioned by anyone.

Perceptions about the nature of gender relations
The general agreement in the community was that the advent of Islam had introduced more egalitarian social norms, such as limiting men to marrying only up to four women, which many believed had not been a conventional practice before.[16] In almost all research activities men and women expressed the conviction that the Tidjani Brotherhood was more open to gender equality than other brotherhoods. Nonetheless, men were still generally considered superior to women. During the participatory workshop men and women were asked to list gender commonalities and differences, from which it emerged that child birth, menstruation, monogamy and inferior social status were identified as characteristics exclusive to women. Men, on the other hand, were widely associated with superior social status, polygamy and the role to protect and to provide for the family. Natural needs, culture, religion, tradition and parenting were listed as shared characteristics. It is notable that when I asked if women's social status reflected intrinsic inferiority, there was no unanimous answer.

In most cases, gender roles in this community were justified on the premise of female and male physiology and psychology, as well as customary convictions of male superiority. Some articulations suggested that these ideas were premised on a more profound, faith-based ontological understanding of gender difference which was often articulated on principles of complementarity. This was highlighted in the answer of an elderly woman who observed that man and woman "are complementary beings created in this way by God." (29 March 2015).

Recent enforcement of social equality through legislative changes, despite having weakened conventional ideas of male superiority, was perceived to have had little influence within the private sphere. During the workshop the idea that women are less intellectually able seemed to underpin some male opinions and this was premised on a faith-based logic, specifically on the grounds that a man's testimony in Islamic court is equivalent to two women's accounts and that a man inherits twice as much as a woman does. Women were more likely to point out that this was not an indication of unequal value, but

rather a practical arrangement in view of the fact that men are household providers and need more financial means to take care of their dependents. In a confidential conversation after the workshop, a female participant said that such asymmetries are instituted in the Qur'an and cannot be altered. However, she observed that in real life women often prove more capable than men and she personally found no reason to put too much weight on these "stereotypes."

Young males seemed more prone to accept as part of their tradition male superiority. According to an 18-year old male FGD participant, "The woman must obey. A woman must accept everything her husband says. The sister must always obey her brother. The woman is always 'at the rear' ["*derrière*"] of the husband. This is prescribed in the Qur'an." (31 December 2014). Although other men in the same group agreed with this statement, they were more aware of the fact that there was a thin line between customary practice and religious beliefs, which suggested that these were perceived as distinctive in the minds of the respondents. A male in his twenties observed:

> A woman is inferior according to tradition [practice], not according to religion. But, within religion, it is also believed that woman must stay in the rear. The tradition instead demands this. They are [broadly] in agreement and we cannot separate them easily. These two go together. (31 December 2014).

At least the latter seems to have been increasingly questioned in recent years however. During the all-female FGD, participants spoke extensively about legislative changes instituted by the Senegalese state, including the Wade parity law of 2010 and changes in family laws, noting some departure from customary norms. All participants agreed that such changes have had an impact on women's status in society and have successfully restricted certain practices pernicious to girls and women, such as early marriage, female circumcision and conjugal violence. For instance, one female interlocutor observed that, "Today, if the husband beats the wife, the wife can file charges against the husband." (30 December 2014). However, this impact has not managed to displace the deeply entrenched conviction that women must dedicate themselves to the husband and children. One female participant of 26 explained this as follows:

> One must understand that in Peul society women can study, obtain university diplomas, work. But […] when you are in the home you think and act as a mother of a family, you obey the order of the husband; because the husband is always superior. This is how religion sees us. This applies to the majority of the culture. Woman is always inferior to the man. She can work, but only man has the right to be free, to express himself, to be autonomous. (30 December 2014).

It is perhaps for such persisting factors that a member of the local council stated that, "Women can never be equal to men. Of course, there can be equality of profession and education, but never in the family, in the private sphere. Fundamentally, men are superior to women. To change the mentality of men is very difficult." (4 April 2015).

Nonetheless, during a casual conversation with local women it was mentioned that men are increasingly "becoming more educated" and can set up progressive rules in the family. A newly-married woman told me that despite her marriage, she continued her education with the encouragement of her husband. Women in the FGD also agreed that "inside the house everyone lives how they want to live" although they did emphasise that "in the Muslim community, the man is always superior to the woman." (30 December 2014). The idea seemed to be that "every man creates his own rules" in the local society which could result in some households being organised under more egalitarian principles, even as they appeared to continue to abide by the patriarchal norms of the broader society.

Religious socialisation and gender ideas

The conventional norm in Guédé is for children to be sent to Qur'anic school when they are five or six, before or while attending (secular) school.[17] Male FGD participants explained that "learning the Qur'an is a lifelong process… Lessons are free and are organized by the *marabouts*. They are both for boys and girls." (31 December 2014). In Guédé, those who aspire to be Tidajnis, usually train under local *marabouts*, where they practice *wird*, a litany of daily prayers. Reportedly, *wird* is something both men and women can and do, which may explain in part why Sufi brotherhoods in Senegal may be considered relatively progressive concerning women.[18]

The FGDs suggested that religious socialisation continues at home, where women and men are reportedly socialised with different expectations about their roles and responsibilities in life. According to one young male participant,

> In our society, the mother is responsible for the education of the children. The husband searches for resources and food outside of the house. The boys are closer to their mother, the girls closer to their fathers. This is how it is in our society. Because of this, there is always a difference between how girls and boys are educated [socialised]. (31. December 2014).

The implication here seems to be that girls' socialisation depends to a large degree on their fathers' gender ideals and boys' socialisation to their mothers'. One FGD female participant seemed to confirm this when she noted that her father, as opposed to other fathers, had raised her equal to her brother, sending both female and male children to school and encouraging his daughters to choose their own husbands.

Despite reportedly having equal access to Qur'anic education and in view of the differentiation in socialisation, women and men generally expressed their understandings of religious prescriptions around gender differently. The young men who participated in the discussion group agreed that men are superior to women because this is instituted in Islam, which they learned from their forefathers. Many women however doubted that this was the "correct" interpretation ("l'interpretationvrai") of their religion. A university-educated 26-year old woman was convinced that,

It is the interpretation that makes people think that [women are inferior to men]. Indeed, in Islam it is expected from women to submit ["_soumettre_"], but this should be interpreted as adoration and respect because this is the way for women to win a place in heaven. In our religion, man and woman must share [for the wellbeing of both]. (29 March 2015).

She argued that it was the influence of "culture" and the conservative socialisation of boys by the previous generations that created a context for such "misinterpretations" of Islam. This aligned with what was said during the all-male FGD, namely that religious socialisation continues at home where boys are taught to obey parents' will and follow the traditions of the forefathers. The earlier comments would suggest that it is likely the mother who plays a major role in instilling these values in the boy child.

The religion-culture dichotomy
One exercise during the participatory workshop asked participants to identify in a Venn diagram the most prominent social institutions in their community. As shown in Figure 1, female and male participants drew "Islam" to be the most prominent and influential, with "tradition" being positioned within Islam, although after some debate among workshop participants. This made evident the prominence of religious institutions, but also the challenge of separating cultural heritage from religious teachings, which in most people's experiences overlapped, despite being conceived at some analytical level as distinct. Furthermore, Islam was identified with the mosque (*"la mosquée"*), whereas tradition was equated with the elders (*"les anciens"*). The discussion that followed the workshop exercise suggested that the old generation has enforced traditional practices, but does not act outside of Islamic expectations. Yet some observed that often "culture" is hijacked by "religion" due to people's limited knowledge of Qur'anic texts. Male FGD participants mentioned, for example, early marriage as a pernicious customary practice that had been propagated by religious leaders under the claim that it was Islamic.

Referring to the religion-culture dichotomy, one Imam explained that "the rules of the religion are the same for all the people", they are "universal", but "the culture is an individual thing. Every person must decide how to combine culture with religion." (27 March 2015). As if to validate this, one female FGD participant noted that in the Qur'an there are no castes and any woman can marry any man. On the contrary, she explained, in the social context there are other parameters, such as social hierarchy, age, or class, which are not accounted for in the sacred text and which make life "more complicated." (30 December 2014).

Figure 1: *Venn diagram showing "most important" institutions as sketched by participants during workshop*
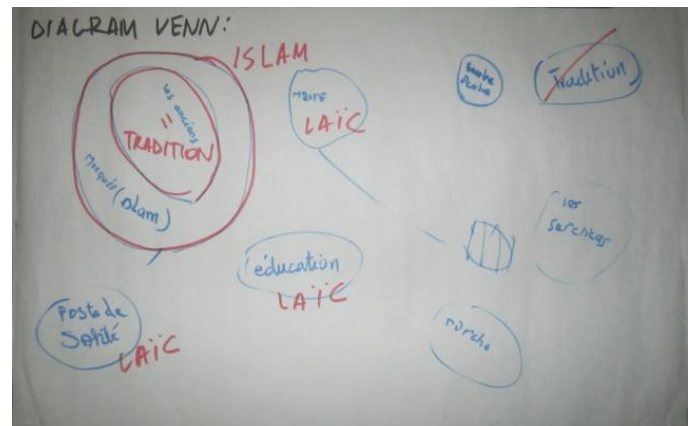
Generally, "Islam" featured higher than what was perceived to be "Peul culture", but it seemed to be recognised that in practice, customary norms, religious expectations and indigenous beliefs have interwoven so that they cannot be demarcated easily. The former mayor made also a pertinent comment:

Islam, though came in the eleventh century, did not completely defeat the existing social and cultural organization. We still have our old ways, practice, local wisdom. Islam is another layer. You can't really take religion outside of our worldview. Culture is the way we see the world, the way we relate with one another, the way we see our environment. Religion is part of it. It is prominent in some areas. It is not always religion that matters however. Other people still have supernatural beliefs [e.g. local spirits]. Islam tolerates the pre-existing. We are not clear where the boundaries are. (29 July 2015).

This statement was meant to emphasise the syncretic character of most people's beliefs, but also to draw attention to the fact that religious prescriptions may appear to govern society, but in actuality these are part of a nexus of many cultural and practical factors that cannot be easily disentangled and which simultaneously shape human perceptions and govern human actions.

The position of religious leaders and their influence
In Guédé, *marabouts* were reported to teach the Qur'an to children, guide married couples through marriage and resolve conflicts. During the all-male FGD, it was declared that, "the *marabout*….is like a parent." (31 December 2014). However, the Imams and *marabouts* appeared to espouse different positions on the topic of equality, although they never appeared to confront each other. In the meeting with the elders, one influential Imam expressed the following rationale: "Man marries

and divorces the woman. The man is therefore fundamentally superior to woman." (29 March 2015). Others joined in to clarify that, "Traditionally there has been nowhere written that man is superior to woman", and that,

> The superiority of man comes directly from God. It is not God who said that men are superior to women, but the Qur'an is the word of God and this word was interpreted by the Prophet who was sent by God. Because the Prophet understood the will of God, he interpreted it as God wanted. So God established men as superior.

In a later personal interview, the principal Imam expressed a more nuanced understanding. Without denying that males have a leading place in Islamic gender order, he spoke of equal opportunity for men and women to enter paradise, which could denote that at some ontological level man and woman were perceived to have parity. When I asked about the reasons behind the local Imams' different interpretations at the meeting that had preceded, he diplomatically replied that religious leaders may be paralleled to "political parties", each trying their best to safeguard the interests of the community in ways each considers appropriate (1 April 2015).

Despite the centrality of Imams and *marabouts* in the local society, many ordinary people posited that their influence was increasingly diminishing. A 30 year-old university-enrolled male argued that:

> Today the *marabouts* are […] not as powerful as they used to be. For example, in the past the *marabouts* prohibited girls from going to school. But now girls go to school! Also, circumcision is an African practice that the *marabouts* accepted and encouraged within their very religion. Sometimes, the *marabouts* draw from tradition and mix with religious beliefs. The *marabouts*, as we say, have "two hearts." Historically, the *marabouts* would establish links between traditional practices and Islam, even if [these practices were] not native to Islam. (2 April 2015).

In the view of this young man, the reduced influence is the result of a combination of many intricate factors, primarily the existence of multiple sources of information (radio, TV, internet) which has increasingly enabled individuals to investigate the validity of the Imams' and the *marabouts*' claims concerning religious prescriptions and to become exposed to alternative interpretations that they may find to be more convincing or authoritative.[19]

Other reasons for this decline were attributed to the inconsistencies of some religious leaders. According to a female participant, a certain Imam explicitly encouraged community members to vote for a specific candidate in the last elections which she considered to have been out of line. Commenting on another Imam, two women noted that whereas upon his arrival in the community he had condemned the habit of women wearing white gowns at their wedding day (on the rationale that this was a western tradition), he allowed his own daughter to have a reception that involved wearing a white gown. This perceived inconsistency led the two women to doubt the Imam's integrity and to conclude that "it is not Islam that is bad but individuals who do not follow the rules as set by God."(29 March 2015).

Faith, modernity and globalised (western) ideals of equality

In Guédé Chantier modernity and tradition coexist in what appears to be a harmonious and dynamic relationship. For example, it is not unusual to find women bathing half-nude in the local canal, which crosses through the village centre, in front of passers-by. This, according to the village's former mayor, is an indication of African culture being stronger than Islam, which he conveyed with the frequent statement that, "We are first African and then Muslim." It is also noteworthy that most women in the village did not veil themselves and I happened to meet two sisters with opposite habits. Not wearing a headscarf was an option, although it was informally suggested that those who did not wear one could still be questioned by more conservative mind-sets among their peers.

While some norms could be attributed to "African" heritage, improvements for women were perceived to be the outcome of recent legislative changes. One domain where such changes are perceptible is girls' education. In a 2010 sample survey in Guédé, 52.44 per cent of all students who reported to attend school were female (PIC 2011-2016), a significant change from the years 1975-1980, when according to female FGD participants, "no girl pursued education." (30 December 2014). During a personal interview with a woman of 25, I was told that "In the past, women never participated in decisions, but today the situation is quite different." (29 March 2015). Another female interlocutor added that girls can now even opt out of marriage as long as they show commitment to learning. If the girls "sensitise" their parents and discuss their education, the parents usually allow them to prioritise education (27 March 2015). The only condition is that girls show discipline and decency while pursuing their studies, which seemed to suggest that change could be accepted locally provided it aligned with religious values and ideals about gender-specific behaviour.

> Another change that has occurred is that while young people continue to marry within caste, younger generations now "cross borders" more easily. Research participants observed numerous times that parents are now more likely to accept these marriages fearful of their children's revolt if they oppose them. One older woman noted that, "Today if you do not listen to your children, you will lose them" (29 March 2015), which would seem to challenge the postulation made by some

FGD male participants that children must always obey parents' wishes. Such changes should be juxtaposed to the general emphasis that was placed on family bonds in the local society and the expectation that children will support their parents in old age.

The extent to which individuals in Guédé accept change is questionable however. An educated young woman who thought that western ideas of gender equality are helpful, noted that international non-governmental organisations that had aimed in the past to promote gender equality in her community had failed because they had proposed programmes that did not obtain the support and did not actively engage the men. On the other hand, she noted that men had repeatedly shown unreceptiveness to any programme that used "empowerment" language (28 March 2015).[20] During the meeting with the religious leaders it was also noted that, "All the organisations that come here have emancipation agendas and are against Islam." (29 March 2015).

People were also ambivalent regarding girls' education. During a personal conversation one Imam expressed feelings of disapproval on the grounds that education "gives her more confidence to think differently than her parents, which creates conflict." (27 March 2015). On the other hand, a married man of 37 opined that, "it is important for the spouses to finish their school because then spouses think similarly. They are conscious of the same priorities." (2 April 2015).

Figure 2: *Participants' definitions of development produced during a participatory workshop exercise*

What is less questionable is that current modernization processes are not equivalent to secularisation. If there was one recurrent element in my conversations, this was the adherence of the interlocutor—young or old, literate or illiterate, female or male—to their faith. During the participatory workshop, in an exercise in which participants were asked to define development, respect for religion were combined with concepts of freedom and improved economic wellbeing (Figure 2). Although

development was generally associated with material improvements and life security, most of the participants noted that development must also ensure the peaceful transformation of local culture, the "elevation of thinking", but also the preservation of religion, tradition and customs.

In the personal interviews, the younger generation generally suggested that culture needs to evolve peacefully, whereas the older people, including a woman of 68, emphasized the priority of "preserving tradition." (1 January 2015). Contrary to this, faith was unanimously identified with the context of human existence, and "adhering to the decisions made by God" was given prominence. The same pattern was seen in how gender issues were approached, which were rationalised often through the prism of faith. This is what one university-enrolled and newly-married woman of 25 had to say:

> For me to pray, to respect my husband, to fast, to give alms, to offer part of my finances is everything I have to do to enter heaven.[21] When you do all these things, the doors of Paradise open for you. I follow Islam out of passion. If you follow the Qur'an you are free. Every time you are in a difficult situation, you can ask God to help you. (4 April 2015).

However, when I asked this young woman whether she felt equal to men in her community, she remained silent. An older female relative interceded to say that the answer lies in the heart and could not be shared. She added nonetheless that "in Islam men are always favoured." (27 March 2015). One university-enrolled woman from Guédé whom I interviewed in the city of Dakar noted that she did not feel that her faith challenged her own ideals of gender equality, but she expressed frustration at the persistence of a segment in society to interpret religious verses under the influence of customary prescriptions of male superiority.

Discussion

The gender-sensitive analysis presented above was guided by my concern to account for the local religio-cultural cosmology in the investigation of gender relations in Guédé Chantier and to explore how religio-cultural beliefs intertwined with local normative systems and how these compared to globalised (western) concepts of gender equality. This juxtaposition was expected to reveal the relevance of mainstreamed gender and development approaches locally, suggesting also adjustments that could be made to attune these better to local religio-cultural sensibilities.

In general, the research activities made evident that the epistemological framework of the people I interacted with was imbricated in their local religious cosmology, reinforcing Istratii's direct association between epistemology and specific worldviews. Religious tradition was invariably invoked as authoritative knowledge, provided rules for organising everyday life

and appeared to guide everyday ethics. A research participant would likely echo Fatima Adamu in affirming that "Islam is a total way of life, and we aspire to conduct our lives according to its teachings" (Adamu 1998: 58). As religious cosmology was pervasive, gender subjectivities were also rationalised in reference to religious ideals, which seemed to perpetuate the gendered organisation of life whereby women were expected to care for the house and men for livelihoods outside. However, religious beliefs and expectations were intertwined with what my interlocutors perceived to be local African culture, which meant that religious teachings were not understood unanimously, but were formulated within culture-specific socialisation. Subsequently, gender-specific ideals were understood and embodied differently reflecting individuals' distinct religio-cultural socialisation, which was an equation of many things, including education, exposure to western culture and values, position in local power relations, age and individual temperament.[22]

As a result, some participants were dismissive of western forms of gender equality, while a few opined that gender equality ideals brought from outside could be desirable if pursued in a culture-sensitive way, for example, if they engaged more actively with men. Younger and more literate people were more likely to be favourable to western gender ideals, but they also recognised that secular gender equality conceptions did not suffice because they did not consider gender-related religious beliefs and expectations. Simultaneously, all participants spoke with reverence about their religious heritage, which made it difficult to discern what innovations regarding gender-specific norms and inter-gender attitudes they would accept and what they would oppose.

Among religious leaders and elders, who continue to be influential in the community despite gradually losing the monopoly in the production of religious knowledge, some adamantly supported "modern" but not "westernised" changes, while some received gender equality ideals with open-mindedness, but still insisted on faith being their reference point for conceiving the world and gender relations. Regardless of gender, economic or social group, transformative talk of normative gender norms (for instance a total reversal of gender roles in the family) was non-existent and change was generally conceived within the boundaries of the local religio-cultural cosmology, however defined by each individual. A female interlocutor's observation perhaps highlights this most cogently: "Islam will never change. The individual is responsible for making changes, according to what is allowed within the religion and what is not." (25 March 2015).

These observations suggest that overcoming current gender asymmetries in this community on the basis of western gender ideals that emphasise same rights, positions and valuations in society may be inadequate due

to a very different epistemological framework that prevailed. Changes in the status of women in public did not seem to have displaced more profound ideas about gender ontology that emanated from people's religio-cultural belief system and that preserved traditional inter-gender arrangements in place. These gender metaphysics would need to be captured better within the local cosmological repertoire to achieve a more comprehensive gender analysis and to understand what sort of programmes might be most effective locally.

Furthermore, the different ways in which gender norms were attributed to cultural or religious interpretations seemed to underscore the need for understanding better how differently gendered individuals invoked different types of locally valid knowledge to rationalise and justify their gender attitudes and societal gender norms. For instance, it would be interesting to examine further the ethnographic observation that women who were raised by fathers with more egalitarian perspectives tended to interpret Islamic teachings in more egalitarian ways.

It would be equally important to clarify better in reference to what paradigms or local groups village residents defined their Islamic tradition. Often research participants invoked the examples of daughters or sons of highly respected individuals to justify their own understandings and 'lifeways', such as in the case of this woman who said to me: "Why do the daughters of the Imam or the granddaughters of (name) let the girls work and do things differently? This must mean that Islam does not prohibit women's free choice." (25 March 2015). These observations suggest that peer influence might have a role to play in changing some attitudes, as long as these peers are considered to follow an approved form of Islam—an approval that obviously does not eschew where one is located in the socio-cultural and political hierarchy.

In sum, the research makes evident that it would be necessary to embed gender-sensitisation efforts in the local religio-cultural cosmology and Islamic hermeneutics, which may be some departure from the approaches of Muslim feminist thinkers.[23] This would require understanding well the discursive processes by which the local religious tradition has been established as authoritative. It would be equally urgent to investigate to what degree religious discourses influenced not only people's articulations, but also private attitudes that they might not have verbalised to me, as well as their actual everyday behaviour.

Conclusion
The premise of this research project was that religio-cultural cosmologies and spiritual experience have not been captured substantively in mainstream frameworks of gender and development as a result of a secular logic that has prevailed in gender and development theorisation and practice. The project introduced a participatory ethnographic methodology that attempted to prioritise the

local religio-cultural cosmology without assuming western epistemological demarcations and to analyse gender relations and subjectivities from within the local belief and knowledge system. While the results can only be suggestive of the intricate realities on the ground, the study makes evident that development practice needs to pay more attention to local epistemologies because these are likely to define local conceptual possibilities and to influence fundamentally subjectivities and gender relations, and subsequently possibilities for normative and attitudinal change in the gender domain.

The study suggests furthermore that a combination of ethnographic and participatory methods can offer important research directions, but this requires reflexivity on behalf of the practitioner and a humble suspension of preconceived theories of 'gender' or 'religion', recognising that mainstream theoretical frameworks have been embedded in western epistemology that cannot capture the variable systems of reasoning cross-culturally. Even so, the composite methodology that was employed here cannot be considered adequate since crucial questions about the relationship between human behaviour and the local religio-cultural cosmology were not addressed. These tools, therefore, should be embedded in more rigorous, human-centred and multi-dimensional investigations.

Note

[1] I define cosmology roughly as a belief system. A cosmology is directly linked to epistemology (valid ways of knowing), ontology (ways of being) and ethics (principles governing social relations). In this sense, the definition departs from a clearly etymological one which would emphasise principles governing the cosmos (see also Kyriakakis 2012, 135).

[2] I am thinking here of Bodman and Tohidi 1998; Sweetman 1998; Bayes and Tohidi 2001; Greany 2006; Vouhé 2007; Meer 2007; Hoodfar 2007; Tomalin 2011; Tadros 2011; Badran 2011; Bradley 2011; Freeman 2012; DeTemple 2012; and Tomalin 2015. Many more studies have been produced on the nexus of gender and religion but these emanate primarily from the disciplines of anthropology and religious studies. They include ethnographic studies that provide in depth discussion of the complex intersection of gendered subjectivities and religio-cultural socialisation in different knowledge systems (e.g. Boddy 1989, Mahmood 2005; Masquelier 2009; Bradley 2011), and studies that have specifically investigated the role of faith in human perceptions and behaviour (such as, Devin and Deneulin 2011).

[3] The progression of gender theory since the nineteenth century reflects in its totality western feminists' consistent effort to demythologise ways of thinking about sex identity that prevailed in their respective times and societal contexts. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when western societies were experiencing the expansion of humanist philosophy, feminists could still speak of 'essence' or 'nature' to attribute to their subject matter, the woman, although it was not adequately explained what the ontology of this presumed female or male 'essence' was imagined to be (Alcoff 1988: 411). As anti-humanist critiques expanded, the previous "metaphysics of substance" (Butler 1990) started to

be questioned and a crucial step in this direction was the very incorporation of the term 'gender' in feminist discourse. However, since a secularisation or materialization of human ontology had occurred in western societies following the medieval tendency of theology-informed conceptualisations, even the analytic of gender was underpinned initially by notions of biological determinism (Nicholson 1994; Oyĕwùmí 1997). Gradually this "materialist metaphysics" (Nicholson 1994) of both gender and sex were problematized and eventually reconceived as socially constructed. Thenceforth, feminist theory of gender became preoccupied with liberating itself of "biological foundationalism" (Nicholson 1994) and focused on understanding how men and women could be explained as socially constituted in view of anatomical differences, but not limited to those. The rise of post-modernism encouraged a total replacement of a materialist ontology with an "ontology of social things, relations, and non-substantive (and often normative) kinds" (Haslanger and Ásta 2017), which has enabled theorists to subsume bodies into non-substantive kinds. All gender theorisations in the twentieth century have been premised on the sciences or (immanent) philosophy, as opposed to theology or belief systems that do not forego reference to the transcendental, which reflects the gradual secularisation of western societies since the scientific revolution and various stages of Enlightenment.

[4] This year-long research aimed to explore gender dynamics in the agricultural systems of a number of African countries. It was funded by the Thomas J. Watson Foundation in New York as a fellowship. Within the year I travelled independently to more than 60 rural communities in Ghana, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Tanzania, where I interviewed farmers, duty-holders, NGO representatives, and other actors involved in gender-sensitive agricultural development. I lived most of the year in village communities in an attempt to become exposed to the life of farmers and to understand the local agricultural systems, their strengths and weaknesses, but also the gender differentials in division of work, access of opportunity, and decision-making authority in agricultural livelihoods.

[5] This echoes post-colonial critiques by numerous (predominantly) African anthropologists and practitioners who have pointed to very different gender systems within their native societies. See for example Amadiume (1987), Oyĕwùmí (1997), and Nnaemeka (1998). A specific argument for Islamic contexts has been made in Mahmood (2005).

[6] Due to time restrictions, no analysis of religious teachings was undertaken in the context of this study. A text-based approach could provide important insights, but it would only insufficiently reveal the workings of lived faith, which does not have to reflect religious ideals (Devin and Deneulin 2011). In addition, the literature made evident that religious traditions are specific to context and history (see also Esposito 2005; Masquelier 2009; Badran 2011) which means that understanding local religious tenets would require lengthier research to establish what Islamic tradition dominated locally and trace back to traditional authorities to identify the authoritative interpretations.

[7] It should be clarified here that this was not Action Research that aimed to "raise consciousness" about a certain preconceived problem and to mobilise community action. In this case, gender inequality was not identified as a problem *a priori* because that assumption was suspended to be explored.

[8] It should be underscored that the former mayor himself played no active role in this research. His invitation, hospitality and openness to the project were pivotal and made it possible, but he was always based in Dakar and was never involved directly in any research activities. Nonetheless, it is true that during our initial arrival to the village he introduced me to my first male assistant and that I interacted disproportionately more with his family by default of staying with them. This could have affected the information I collected by excluding my accessibility to a certain group of people determined by political affiliation, local alliances and family histories. In addition, the choice of research assistant could have affected who would be reached and included in research activities. Most importantly, my acquaintance with the former mayor could have led people to censor themselves when talking to me for political or personal reasons unknown to me. A number of factors lead me to think that these concerns were unsubstantiated. Firstly, the former mayor had only recently ceased to hold this position as a result of village elections from which a new mayor had emerged. In these elections the village had become deeply divided between the two candidates. This became especially evident during the workshop I held where participants openly debated the election results. My research activities involved many community members who had voted against the former mayor (as they confided in me), which leads me to believe that my acquaintance with the latter did not limit me to certain perspectives. In addition, I changed multiple research assistants as I expanded my contacts and I also tried to reach out to people without the mediation of others as I explain below.

[9] The all-male group was homogenously young and this was a purposive choice because I observed that young men hesitated to express themselves openly in front of older men. The all-female group included variable ages as it was the general case that young women were more outspoken in front of other women and very often contradicted their female elders.

[10] No reimbursement was offered to participants because I felt that this could disrespect local hospitality rules and commoditise academic research. I explained to participants that the workshop was part of my MA research project but also a development-oriented sensitisation technique that would provide a forum for knowledge exchange to improve our critical thinking together, especially concerning the development needs of the community. While in the first day participants most likely attended out of curiosity, in the second day, when more people participated, the reason appeared to be different. From evaluations I heard, it is likely that participants found it empowering to openly debate with each other issues that would have been otherwise left unspoken as a result of religio-cultural or political taboos. It should also be mentioned that I decided on a gender-mixed workshop because of the liberty with which men and women in this society appeared to communicate, debate and argue openly with each other.

[11] Some illiterate or low literacy people participated in the workshop (one spoke no French at all), but they managed to contribute because I asked other members to work in groups and to translate for them in Peul. This is one reason behind splitting people in groups, in which they interacted with others whom they knew and could help them.

[12] These exercises were my own design, but they were premised on mapping techniques widely used in participatory development-oriented research (e.g. Slocum et al. 1995).

[13] Language in this case signifies culture. The Haalpulaaren include the Peul, Fulbe and Tukulor, who all speak Pulaar. It should be noted however that the Fulbe and Tukulor are believed to have slightly different histories, with the former having been pastoralists, and the latter to have descended from the first agriculturalist populations who inhabited the Fouta Toro. See also the brief reference in Villalón (1995: 51).

[14] The Tidjani brotherhood was founded by Sheikh Ahmed Tidjani, who was Prophet Muhammad's grandson. In Senegal, the brotherhood was established by El Hajji Umar Tall, who was born in 1797 in a village not far from Guédé, called Ville Alwar. Umar Tall became influential because he led holy fights ("jihads") against the French colonisers, and although he disappeared in 1864, he still evokes awe and national pride. When I invited workshop participants to list the most important events in the history of the community of Guédé, Umar Tall's jihad was proudly included among key events, along with the establishment of Guédé (1933) and the independence of Senegal (1960).

[15] The principles of the Tidjani Brotherhood were expressed by the Principal Imam as follows: 1. Praying to be forgiven for your sins ('Astafiroullah'), 2. Recognising no one as divine but God ('La Illa Ha Illalah'), 3.Praying to the Prophet Mohammad ('SalatouAllaleNabby') (Abdoulaye Ly, 1 April 2015).

[16] Although marriage to multiple women was restricted, it can be questioned whether in reality Islam brought more equality. See for example Callaway and Creevey (1989).

[17] According to a survey cited in the official development plan document of the community, about 13.58 percent of children sampled in 2010 reported to attend Qur'anic school, with the equivalent percentage in secular education reaching 31.8 percent (PIC 2011-2016).

[18] On women and Sufi brotherhoods in Senegal see also Creevey (1991), Bop (2005) and Hill (2010).

[19] During my fieldwork I was directed by a local educated youth (with plans to pursue studies in the United States) to a famous scholar of Islam who delivers broadcasts on national TV. The young man had obtained the telephone number after listening to one broadcast and had previously called the marabout to ask advice about his academic future. I spoke to this famous marabout and he proved to be highly critical of the local Brotherhood and the local Imams' patriarchal views on gender relations and argued that their knowledge is not compatible with official and informed religious tenets but is adulterated with customary understandings.

[20] The young woman mentioned Counterparts International as a programme that had failed in her community. She also expressed disdain at the fact that most programmes were begun, but because the local complexities were not understood and surpassed organisations soon abandoned their plans and left programmes incomplete.

[21] These, along with the pilgrimage to Mecca once in one's lifetime, comprise the five principles of Islam.

[22] This seems to echo Talal Asad's observation that "the process by which a particular interpretation of a canonical source comes to be authorised depends not only upon one's knowledge of the scholarly tradition, but also upon the practical context of power relations (including hierarchies of age, class, gender, and knowledge) under which textual authority is invoked." (Mahmood 2005: 116).

[23] Many Islamic feminists in response to religious leaders' tendency to use classical jurisprudence for the enforcement of unegalitarian gender relations, have selected to work within

the religious framework, careful not to deviate from perceived divinely inspired tradition and opposing what can be established as manmade interpretations (see the work of Musawah; Mir-Hosseini 2006; Wadud 2009; Mir-Hosseini and Hamzić 2010). In the understanding of this researcher, Islamic feminists by taking this approach have deviated somehow from local/insiders' hermeneutical traditions motivated by certain feminist standards that they espouse. In contrast, this study suggests a need to approach the local religious tradition through the historically valid exegetical framework of the local faithful.

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