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‘How, for God’s sake, can I be a good Muslim?’ Gambian Youth in Search of a Moral Lifestyle

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Gambian Youth in Search of a Moral Lifestyle

Abstract

By analysing the case study of a young Muslim man’s conversion within and between different expressions of Islam in the Gambia, this article challenges common understandings of conversion that see it as a transition from one form of religious belief or identity to another, as well as theories of Islam’s place in Africa that distinguish between ‘local’ traditions and ‘world’ religions. The ethnographic case study illustrates that for Gambian youth conversion is not a unilinear path but entails the continuous making of moral negotiations and a preparedness to reflect on the ambiguity of selfhood—an inevitable result of the making of these negotiations.

Keywords

Conversion, Islamic reform, Tablighi Jama‘at, Salafiyya, Pentecostalism, Morality, Youth, West Africa, the Gambia

Main text: 9,205 words

When during my ethnographic field research in the Gambia, a West African country with a Muslim-majority population, I discussed with a group of young Muslim men the changes in their life upon joining Islamic reform movements they told me that they had become ‘true Muslims’.¹ They defined a true Muslim as a practising Muslim who has integrated the Prophet Muhammad’s model in all his undertakings. A Gambian man in his late twenties put it as follows:

Before, I prayed and fasted, but I didn't know much about Islam. I called myself a Muslim but at that time 'Muslim' was a mere title for me. I conceived Islam as my right and not as a favour from Allah ... Nowadays even when I'm sleeping I observe the *Sunna* (Prophetic traditions). I worship Allah twenty-four hours a day.

Among the reform movements most popular among Muslim youth in the Gambia are the Tablighi Jama'at and Salafiyya.² Whereas the two differ in their method of bringing about Islamic reform—with the former mainly concentrating on lay preaching whereas the latter puts more emphasis on the importance of religious education—they share what Roy (2004: 11) calls the 'quest to define pure religion beyond time and space'. The idea behind Islamic reform (*tajdid*) is that only by observing Islamic principles can the ideal past of the Prophet Muhammad be restored. However, the youngsters whom I interviewed were endeavouring not only to 'return to the Prophet's time', but also to reconcile their piety with what they called a 'modern' lifestyle, characterized by listening to popular music, going out with their girlfriends to nightclubs and engaging in sports and other forms of leisure.

Although they had been Muslims by birth, my interlocutors described their joining of the Tablighi Jama'at and Salafiyya as a 'conversion'. As in the case of a newborn who is converted into a Muslim, several interlocutors shaved their hair or cut off their dreadlocks—the outward sign of their previous 'sinful life'—upon joining these movements. Similarly, just as a newborn baby is named to integrate him in society, several interlocutors adopted more Arabic forms for their names upon their conversion to the Jama'at and Salafiyya. This shows that their turn to reformist Islam is not simply a commitment to an ideology, but is indeed perceived as a conversion. Interestingly, the local term used for the ritual process whereby a newborn is integrated in society, *tuubi*,³ is

the same term that my interlocutors employed to describe their conversion to reformist Islam.

Strikingly, several interlocutors portrayed themselves as ‘Born-Again Muslims’. Their ideology of becoming true believers through a process of conversion based on the idiom of new birth may bring Pentecostal discourse to mind. Indeed, Islamic reform and Pentecostal Christianity share a great deal of common ground in West Africa and, while disagreeing on doctrine, overlap in several of the religious practices on which they depend and the social processes they set in motion (Larkin and Meyer, 2006). Instead of taking for granted the oppositions between the two religious traditions, this article explores their convergence as expressed in their conceptions of conversion. Through conversion, both reformist Muslims and Pentecostal Christians dissociate themselves, whether symbolically or actually, from their past in the form of local cultural traditions. This rupture with the past—a precondition for becoming born again—coincides with the development of new moral subjectivities. The moral self-transformation set in motion by conversion is of central concern in this article.

The interpretation of conversion in terms of a transformation of the self differs from the ‘classical’ definition of conversion, summarized by Lofland and Stark (1965: 862) as ‘when a person gives up one ... perspective or ordered view of the world for another’. In this definition, as in Horton’s (1971, 1975a, 1975b) and Fisher’s (1973, 1985) well-known conversion theories, the transition from one form of religious belief or identity to another is central. This conventional conception stems from the colonial legacy; colonial missionaries envisaged conversion to Christianity as a single revelation of a universal Truth. Bringing this revelation was considered a civilizing mission and was expected to have a permanently transformative effect on the minds of ‘pagans’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991).

While earlier anthropologists focused on conversion between religions and especially from local ones to world religions, there is an emergent body of literature on a renewed

commitment within Christianity. For instance, Meyer (1998) argues that ‘Make a complete break with the past’ is a call to action often heard in Christian circles in Ghana. She points out that a break with local traditions coincides with new notions of the self and belonging. Whereas for a long time the anthropology of Christianity focused on African Christians’ appropriation of traditional religious practices into their vision of Christianity (Meyer, 2004: 454–458),⁴ Engelke (2004) illustrates the importance of emphasizing the discourse of discontinuity—the break with ‘African custom’—because this allows a better understanding of the dynamics of religious change. Although studies on religious rupture are not without precedent in the study of Christianity in Africa (e.g. Hastings, 1976), the analysis of discontinuity has long been side-lined—a neglect that, according to Robbins (2007), has to do with anthropology’s problem of theorizing change. Anthropology has largely been a ‘science of continuity’: ‘cultural anthropologists have for the most part either argued or implied that the things they study—symbols, meanings, logics, structures, power dynamics, etc.—have an enduring quality and are not readily subject to change’ (Robbins, 2007: 9). Unless anthropologists reconsider this paradigm of continuity they will find it hard to grasp conversion, which inherently implies a radical change (Engelke, 2004: 85).

Compared with the massive body of literature on born-again Christianity, conversion within Islam seems to be somewhat underrepresented. A possible explanation may be that traditional Islamic thought has no concept for conversion. Unlike the Christian baptism, there is, strictly speaking, no formal rite of conversion within Islam (Dutton, 1999; Woodberry, 1992: 22). In addition, studies of conversion to Islam are, according to Searing (2003: 73), relatively rare because there are no written records comparable to those left behind by European missionaries. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature on Islamization based on local perceptions, beginning with Levtzion’s influential work on the expansion of Islam in Africa (1979). Since then several Africanists have mapped the

political-economic conditions under which Islamization took place and its social consequences. Broadly speaking, we see two trends in the literature on Islamization in West Africa—the region that is best represented in the literature on Islam in Africa. The first trend pays attention to conversion from traditional religion to Islam (e.g. Mark, 1985; Searing, 2003; Dramé, 2009; Miran-Guyon, 2012; Thomson, 2012; for reconversion to traditional religion see Baum, 1990), whereas the second trend focuses on conversion from one branch of Islam to another (e.g. Umar, 1993; Rosander, 1997; LeBlanc, 2000; Augis, 2009; Leichtman, 2009). While in the first instance elements of the pre-Islamic local heritage often survived, in the latter a radical critique of the cultural and religious practices of the Muslim elders and a path toward an identity politics of global, pan-Islamic affiliation is at stake (Diouf and Leichtman, 2009: 7). What these trends have in common is that they interpret Islamization as a continuing process of greater conformity and commitment. Generally speaking we could say that whereas scholars studying conversion to Christianity tend to represent the process of becoming Christian as one of eventual transformation (Robbins, 2010), those studying conversion to Islam usually represent it less as an event and more as a perpetual process (Searing, 2003: 73).

Since the concept of conversion has often been construed in Christian, or, more specifically, Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus terms (cf. Nock, 1933), anthropologists of Islam have sometimes preferred an analytical frame other than conversion when writing about Islamization, including reform, revival, Islamic education or piety. Striking examples of the tendency to analyse Islamic reform in terms of an increasing pietization are Mahmood's (2005), Alidou's (2005) and Schulz's (2012) pioneering monographs. Although their focus on individual experiences of piety offers important new insights, including a shift away from the conception of Islamic reform as a monolithic, political force toward the study of Islam as a part of the actual world in which Muslims live, it also has certain drawbacks because the focus on pietization over-emphasizes the coherence and

disciplinary power of Islam. Much contemporary anthropological scholarship on Islamic reform presents a totalizing notion of pious life whereby the earlier lifestyle is exchanged for a new, pious one (see also Schielke, 2009a, 2009b). In this regard, the current ethnographic work on piety partly reproduces the problems of earlier studies in which Islamization was portrayed as a trajectory from an accommodating religion to a pure one (cf. Fisher, 1973, 1985).

Although Islamic reform deserves much wider grounding within the context of conversion theories, my focus here is on parallel trends in the anthropology of Islam and Christianity. Through the conversion narrative of Abdulaye, a young man who portrayed himself as a ‘Born-Again Muslim’, I want to compare Gambian Muslim youths’ conversion to reformist Islam with processes of self-transformation within a Pentecostal variety of Christianity, thereby shedding new light on religious re-affiliation within Islam. Following Engelke (2004), I believe that unpacking a conversion narrative is a good place to start in a discussion of moral self-transformation because it allows us to explore ‘the urge to become new’ (Meyer, 1998: 321) that drives a great number of young, reformist Muslims like Abdulaye.⁵

Abdulaye is an eloquent Tukulor—an ethnic minority in the Gambia that became strongly Islamized in the late 19th century—in his late twenties.⁶ Contrary to the somewhat idealized way of presenting the turn to reformist Islam in much contemporary anthropological scholarship on Islam, Abdulaye’s narrative illustrates that the search for a moral lifestyle is accompanied by subjective multivalence. Like many of his peers, the question that occupied him most was how to become a ‘good Muslim’. Because the Gambia has a long history of Islam and is composed of a Muslim majority population adhering to either Sufism, Ahmadiyya,⁷ Shi‘ism or reformist movements like the Tablighi Jama‘at and Salafiyya, or who define themselves simply as ‘ordinary Muslims’ without affiliating to any movement officially, there is a wide range of answers possible to this

question. In his search for moral perfection, Abdulaye first converted to the Tablighi Jama‘at. He later ‘grew bored’ with the Tablighi method of proselytization and decided to become a Salafi, striving to return to ‘authentic Islam’. Abdulaye’s shifting allegiances illustrate why the study of morality should take into account not only the cultivation of piety, but also the struggle, incoherence and imperfection of everyday living (Masquelier, 2007; Schielke, 2009a, 2009b; Simon, 2009). According to Marsden, ethnographies of Muslim societies that focus narrowly on moral self-fashioning are characterized most strongly by the quality of ‘coherence’ and ‘are unable to confront the ways in which Muslims are called upon to face, explain and contend with inconsistencies and complexities in their attempts to live virtuous lives’ (2005: 260–261). Schielke (2009a: 37–38) therefore pleads for an anthropological study of morality that takes ambivalence as its starting point.

Although the declared aim of the Salafi understanding of Islam is the imposition of an all-encompassing moral discipline that follows the example of the *Salaf*—the pious predecessors who lived at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (Meijer, 2009)—in practice Abdulaye’s ‘reversion’ to Salafiyya allowed for more contention about what ‘being a good Muslim’ involved.⁸ To solve this contention, he engaged in moral compromising, blending the religious with the secular, faith with freedom, the divine with diversion (see also Bayat, 2010: 36). According to Robbins, compromising is inextricably bound up with the quest for morality:

The moral domain is a domain of conscious choice: it is the place where change comes to consciousness. For those caught living between two cultural systems, morality is likely to provide the window through which they can see the contradictions with which they have to live (2004: 14).

In the case of Gambian Muslim youth like Abdulaye the ‘two cultural systems’ that Robbins sees compromisers as ‘living between’ are represented by a pious world in which they strive hard to live in accordance with Islamic principles; and a world of music, dating, sports and other youthful pursuits.

Against the trend to study conversion as a continuous, accumulative movement towards a higher level of piety, I analyse Abdulaye’s conversion narrative in terms of a succession of waves that affect the lives of Gambian Muslim youth seeking a religious dimension in their lives (see also Adraoui, 2009: 379). Studying conversion this way explains why Muslim piety, far from being a clear and shared standard by which youngsters mark out a transformation toward living a proper Muslim life, is subject to fluctuation. As a thirty-year old Gambian Muslim man aptly remarked: ‘Like the waves in the sea, sometimes my *iman* (faith) goes up and at other times it goes down.’

The fact that for Gambian Muslim youth like Abdulaye conversion is not a unilinear path had implications for the way I conducted fieldwork. It compelled me to follow the youths whose conversion narratives I recorded over a long period of time and to focus on how they (re)negotiated both their Muslimness and youthfulness in their everyday living. Establishing contacts with reformist Muslim youth was quite an undertaking. At first I was seen as a spy and an enemy and converts were reluctant to talk with me. To legitimize my research, I argued that the image of ‘fundamentalist’ Islam in the West is distorted and that my research could help to give a more nuanced picture. This had some effect: a number of young men were willing to talk to me, probably induced by curiosity and the idea that it was their religious duty to convey their knowledge of Islam to me. I eventually started receiving interview appointments and invitations to take part in Muslim activities. Nevertheless, my interlocutors’ interaction with me remained marked by a shifting interplay between approach and detachment. Although at times frustrating, this attitude was easy to understand when taking into account Harding’s observation that among

reformists (in her case American Baptists) there is no such a thing as a neutral, participant-observer position and no place for an ethnographer who seeks ‘information’:

It was inconceivable to them that anyone with an appetite for the gospel as great as mine was simply ‘gathering information’, was just there ‘to write a book’. No, I was ‘searching’. . . My story about what I was doing there, instead of protecting me from going native (a kind of ethnographer’s verbal fetish), located me in their world: I was a lost soul on the brink of salvation (1987: 171).

At the end of my fieldwork I learned that because of my perseverance, I was called the ‘iron lady’ by my interlocutors. My endurance in conducting field research on reformist Muslims who see publicity as threatening and discourage researchers from writing about them was somewhat similar to my interlocutors’ perseverance in practising their faith in an environment that was often hostile to them. I think that because perseverance is considered an Islamic virtue, my interlocutors finally allowed me to record their conversion narratives.

Before recording Abdulaye’s narrative and analysing his and his peers’ conversion experiences within the larger socio-cultural context and political economy of Gambian society, I begin with a brief history of the Tablighi Jama‘at and Salafiyya in the country and their growth into youth movements.

The reformist expansion

The Tablighi Jama‘at has its origins in the reformist tradition that emerged in India in the mid-19th century. Its founder, Mawlana Ilyas, believed that Muslims had abandoned the correct path of Islam. Hence, he stressed that they should go back to their faith, which alone would move God to grant them success in this world and the hereafter. To make Muslims genuine believers, Ilyas insisted that it was the duty not just of a few learned scholars but of all Muslims to carry out *tabligh*, that is, missionary work aimed at the

moral transformation of Muslims. Missionary tours by lay preachers became the hallmark of the Jama‘at, established officially in 1927 in the Indian capital of Delhi (Masud, 2000; Sikand, 2002).

Over the years, the Jama‘at has expanded from its international headquarters in India and has grown into what is probably the largest Islamic movement of contemporary times (Ahmad, 1995: 165). Despite its worldwide influence on the lives of millions of Muslims, scholars have paid almost no attention to the movement’s growth in sub-Saharan Africa. An explanation for this indifference is that this region is frequently perceived as the ‘periphery’ of the Muslim world, in terms of both geography and religious influence. Moreover, the recurrent idea of a traditional ‘African Islam’ that is Sufi in orientation and differs from a more orthodox ‘Arab Islam’ hampers a better understanding of Islamic reform.

Here I focus on the Gambia, which, despite its small size, has become a booming centre of Tablighi activities in West Africa during the past decade. The Gambia’s heritage from British colonial rule is one factor that has helped facilitate the spread of the Tablighi ideology, which was disseminated by South Asian missionaries who preached in English, the national language of the Gambia. The appearance of South Asian Tablighi missionaries coincided with the recent political Islamic resurgence in the country. Captain Yahya Jammeh assumed power in 1994 and invoked Islam to enhance his political legitimacy (Darboe, 2007). This provided fresh scope for the creation of a public discourse on Islam in the Gambia. As a result, an increasing number of Gambians (and young people in particular) seemed to be receptive to a new interpretation of their faith. Thus, conditions in the Gambia provided fertile soil for the Jama‘at to take root.

The genesis of the Jama‘at in the Gambia can be traced to Karammoko Dukureh, a trader from Gambisara—a village in eastern Gambia. Dukureh studied in the Arab Muslim world and when he returned to Gambisara in the early 1980s, he set out to make the

villagers more aware of their religion by denouncing their traditional ways of worship and popular forms of piety. Aside from a few sympathizers, the villagers feared that Dukureh wanted to introduce a ‘new religion’ and did not agree with his reformist ideas. Dukureh’s sermons became increasingly antagonistic toward the traditions of the village elders and he was eventually exiled. Until his death in 2000, he continued spreading his ideology in the Gambian city of Serrekunda, in the mosque that came to be known as the *Markaz* (centre), where he was appointed imam.

Since the 1990s, the *Markaz* has expanded into the pivot of the Jama‘at in the Gambia. A mainly youthful audience of up to a thousand is drawn to the weekly programme in the mosque. In addition to the *Markaz*, the Jama‘at also ran a *madrasa* (Islamic school), advocating a puritanical theology based on a literalist interpretation of the Islamic scriptures. In the mid-1990s the *madrasa* was transferred from the *Markaz* to another neighbourhood in Serrekunda, where it can be found today. This transfer had to do with lack of space as well as with a difference in perception between the *madrasa* teachers and the Tablighi preachers. Whereas the former claimed that before one sets out on a missionary tour one needs profound religious training, the latter argued that even lay preachers should perform missionary work. The transfer of the *madrasa* in 1995 can be considered the beginning of the Salafi movement in the Gambia.

From the 1970s on, local Gambian scholars who had graduated from universities and colleges in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Libya and Sudan introduced Salafi ideas in the Gambia. On the grounds that they were educated in formal institutions in the Arab Muslim world, these graduates often claimed to have more insight into the proper interpretation of Islam than the scholars who were trained in the local tradition. Owing to the renewed Afro-Arab cooperation that followed Jammeh’s assumption of power in the Gambia in 1994, international Muslim organizations invested in the construction of *madrasas* propagating a Salafi ideology and the dissemination of Islamic literature with a Salafi message in the

country. Groups of self-proclaimed Salafis capitalized on this development by embracing Salafiyya officially as a new form of religiosity and establishing Salafi organizations in the Gambia in the late 1990s.

Among the best-known of the Salafi organizations in Gambian society is the Islamic study group founded by Sheikh Abdullah, a Ghanaian scholar who established himself in the Gambian capital of Banjul in early 2000 with the aim of introducing Gambians to ‘real Islam’. In an interview Abdullah told me that he decided to settle in the Gambia because of Gambians’ ‘ignorance’ of Islam:

For a long time, proper Islam was unknown in the Gambia. My aim was introducing Gambians to authentic Islam ... We should lift the ignorance from our heads by engaging in religious study; ignorance is very heavy. Knowledge, on the other hand, is blessed.

The scholar soon assembled a group of young students around him and Abdualye later also joined his study group.

A striking feature of the Tablighi Jama‘at and Salafiyya in the Gambia is that they both hold special attraction for lower-middle-class youth between the ages of roughly 15 and 35.⁹ It seems that these youngsters have adopted the movements to carve out a space for themselves in Gambian society in the absence of alternative means of reaching adulthood and a fulfilling life. The Gambian economy has gone into a downward spiral since the 1990s. The rate of unemployment has risen and inflation has increased the cost of living sharply. The situation deteriorated further when the government could not meet the conditions of accountability and transparency that were the prerequisites for a bail out by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Darboe, 2007: 156). Educated youth in particular are hit hard by the Gambian crisis. A university student explained the

discontent of many Gambian youths with their situation in this way: ‘A university degree is the highest degree one can get, but we don’t have trust in it. We engage in proselytization, in order to reclaim our lost identity. We derive comfort from our religion.’

Although prevailing analytical perspectives often take African youth’s marginalized position for granted, Gambian youngsters’ turn to religion cannot be reduced solely to worsening socio-economic conditions. The Jama‘at and Salafiyya also appeal to them because they serve as what Weiss (2008: 199) calls a ‘moral compass’: they give direction to the life of disenfranchised youngsters by providing them with new religious coordinates on what it means to be Muslim and emotional and institutional support outside long-established village and family structures.¹⁰ By offering Muslims alternatives to traditional models of identity, personhood and belonging, reformist movements have actively shaped the religious landscape in the Gambia over the last decade.

Because they have grown into youth movements in Gambian society, a certain turnover seems to be ingrained in the Tablighi Jama‘at and Salafiyya. The stage in which many Gambian youth find themselves may be described, borrowing a term employed by Hamid (2009: 396), as ‘burnout’. Documenting the development of British Salafiyya, Hamid uses the term to denote a loss of faith among different Salafi groups resulting from their analyses of socio-political problems in the Muslim world and failure to find a solution to these problems. We may argue that as a result of their religious burnout, caused by social and professional obligations or a growing disinterest or disappointment with their religion, some Tablighis suffer a decline in their religious practice and withdraw to a worldly lifestyle (see also Soares and Osella, 2009: 11). Others, like Abdulaye, become tired of what they see as the Jama‘at’s lack of scholastic credentials and intend to return to Islam practised in what they consider its authentic form by reverting to Salafiyya. This pattern of backsliding and reversion is common throughout the Muslim world but is often not recognized because of the blind spot within the anthropology of Islam concerning the

complex and often contradictory way ethical practice works in everyday life (Schielke, 2009b: 164).

Although official records are unavailable, it seems Tablighis outnumber their Salafi peers in the Gambia. Nevertheless, there is a trend perceptible among inquisitive youth to withdraw from the Jama‘at. It remains to be seen whether Salafiyya, opening the prospect of expanding its adherents’ religious knowledge and offering scholarships to study in the Arab Muslim world, will eventually be more successful in attracting youth than the Jama‘at. Abdulaye is one of the youngsters drawn by the Salafi promise of further enlightenment. In what follows, I chart his conversion narrative which he described as a ‘spiritual journey’ leading him towards becoming ‘born again’.¹¹

Abdulaye’s spiritual journey

My friend Kadi, a student from the University of the Gambia, introduced me to her former classmate Abdulaye, who had tried, vainly, to persuade her to veil. I met Abdulaye in his mother’s NGO, dedicated to improving the position of women in the Gambia. While showing me around, he apologized for the ‘awkward’ suit he was wearing. He explained that following the Prophet’s example, Muslims should wear a kaftan, trousers cut to ankle length and a prayer cap, but since he had been invited for a job interview he had to dress ‘Western-style’. After his graduation in French Literature and Development Studies, Abdulaye had worked as a project coordinator in his mother’s NGO, but now that he had married a second wife he needed a well-paid job to be able to support his family. Although there was much at stake for him, he said he was not nervous about the interview because God was with him.

After combing his beard, Abdulaye offered me a lift. He drove his car—given to him by his twin brother, who had migrated to the United States—rather fast. And at the same speed he told me about his life as a Muslim:

My schooldays I spent in Senegal, where my father was employed. I enjoyed learning French at school, but didn't enjoy living in Senegal because many Senegalese aren't proper Muslims. They worship Sufi saints, which is wrong. When I grew up, we moved back to the Gambia where I became more interested in Islam. I tried to live in accordance with Islamic principles by changing my dress code and stopping to listen to popular music. My family did not understand my transformation. Sometimes my mom tells me to shave my beard and wear Western-style clothes because she's afraid that I will never find a good job. I don't listen to her. I encourage her to veil, but she complains that it's too hot in the Gambia. However, hellfire is hotter than wearing the veil!

When we met later that week, it turned out that Abdulaye's job application had not been successful because he was unwilling to shave his beard. He told me that he did not want to compromise his appearance for a 'worldly occupation', and he considered the fact that he had lost an earlier job because of his beard a 'test by Allah'. One of the reasons why Abdulaye let his beard grow was that his wives found him attractive with it:

Like I ask my wives to beautify themselves for me, I groom myself for them. While many of my peers are still unmarried, I already have two wives. People told me that I was too young to marry a second wife, but if one's able to support one's family, by the grace of Allah one should marry more than one wife. One shouldn't postpone marriage; marriage is a form of worship. Marrying a second wife is better than playing around. I have had girlfriends before I married. I used to be a French teacher and I was very popular among my female students but, *alhamdulillah* (praise be to God), I have become serious. When my female students started writing me love letters, I quit my job.

After reciting Quranic verses, Abdulaye—seated on a prayer mat on the floor (following the Prophet’s example, he preferred sitting on the floor to sitting in a chair)—spoke at length about what he called his ‘spiritual journey’:

Since I was a kid, I asked myself what my purpose on earth was. My search for an answer to this question brought me to the Jama‘at in 2001. At that time I was a student. One of my friends decided to go on a missionary tour and I followed his example. After the tour, my life changed completely. I finally became a practising Muslim. Before, I lacked an agenda in my life; I used to have bad habits. I spent my time hanging around on the street, listening to music, going to nightclubs and being useless. The Jama‘at calmed down my ego and hot-headedness ... It was as if I were born again.

Despite his initial zeal, after some years Abdulaye switched allegiance to Salafiyya:

When time went on, I realized that there was a lot of nonsense in the Jama‘at. Its intentions—Allah knows best—are good, but its method is very wrong. Islam is like an ocean and nobody can drink it in one day. Tablighis, however, believe that setting out on missionary tours is more important than gaining knowledge of Islam.

According to Abdulaye, his ‘appetite for Islamic knowledge’ made him ‘quit’ the Jama‘at in 2004:

Since I was eager to learn more about Islam, I was bored to death by the Jama‘at’s method. ... I skyped with Arab scholars and they told me which books I had to

read. The things I read, I tried to implement in my life. I strive hard to lead a *halal* (Islamically lawful) life. My philosophy is to live Islam the way it's supposed to be and to search for religious knowledge. During my search for true Islam, I met many Muslims calling themselves Salafis. I also attend a Salafi study group led by Sheikh Abdullah, during which we read and discuss the Islamic scriptures.

Despite his aim of 'returning' to the time of the Prophet, Abdulaye resorted to modern communication technologies, like tape-recorded sermons, Salafi internet sites and email and Skype exchange with Salafi scholars, in his search for knowledge. In Abdulaye's opinion Salafis are more advanced than Tablighis, whom he considers 'backward' in both their knowledge and practice:

Like you are a researcher, I have researched Islam. The books written by Tablighis are full of falsehoods ... I sought advice via email from several Islamic scholars. They told me that it's better to read the Quran than setting out on missionary tours ... Because the Prophet didn't set out on such tours, it's *bid'a* (unlawful innovation) ... What was done by the Salaf should be done by us as well.

Having spoken at length about his life as a Muslim, Abdulaye announced that he was in the mood to play basketball, his favourite leisure activity. Although many Salafis believe that sports and Islam do not go together, Abdulaye called himself a 'religious sportsman' and claimed that sports is part of the *Sunna*: 'The Prophet himself was involved in sports, like horse riding and archery. It's not bad for a Muslim to do sports as long as he covers his knees.' Besides playing basketball, Abdulaye was engaged in weightlifting,

which he stopped when he became too muscular: ‘It’s not good for Muslims to show off. Muslims should display modesty in their behaviour as well as their appearance.’

Over the years, I stayed in touch with Abdulaye. Via email he updated me about his family and his career (after my departure he finally found a job as a bank employee) and requested me for support. He once wrote to me that he was ‘in dire need of Islamic literature and perfume, preferably from Armani, Hugo Boss, or any other designer’. In 2009 he informed me that he had received a scholarship to participate in a two-year Master’s Degree Programme in French Studies at a French university. Unlike many of his peers, Abdulaye did not want to move to France, but preferred to participate in the programme via a correspondence course:

Muslims have a bad reputation in the West and therefore I prefer to stay here, to the dissatisfaction of my twin brother who migrated to the USA and who wants me to migrate to the USA as well. Instead of traveling to the West, I prefer travelling, when I’m older, to Saudi Arabia in order to make the pilgrimage ... Although I study French literature, I make sure that I also study the Islamic scriptures. By studying French I invest in my life on this earth, but by studying the Quran I invest in my afterlife, which is much more important. May Allah reward us—*Ameen*.

Compromising between being young and being Muslim

According to Jules-Rosette (1975: 135) conversion is ‘a powerful clash resulting from the shift from one realm of thought and action to another, a moment of specific shock’. Similarly, Whitehouse (1998) has presented conversion as a systematic transformation in cognitive systems. Moving away from the strong emphasis on ‘rationality’ in Horton’s conversion model (1971, 1975a, 1975b), Hefner (1993), on the other hand, demonstrates

that conversion is first an issue of ‘self-identification’, and secondary a restructuring of belief systems. Indeed, in Abdulaye’s case it is hard to pinpoint a ‘moment of specific shock’, which led into a shift in his religious beliefs. His conversion to the Tablighi Jama‘at and his later reversion to Salafiyya did not involve a change in belief so much as a shift in religious awareness and in choice of method to bring about religious reform. The change in Abdulaye’s religious awareness occurred after setting out on a missionary tour. Contrary to Tablighis, Salafis value religious study over engaging in missionary tours. This difference in method can be elucidated by Lambek’s (1990) distinction between ‘personal’ and ‘textual’ authority. Whereas Tablighis believe in personal religious authority and face-to-face interactions, Salafis depend more on textual authority, recognizing the Islamic scriptures as the exclusive and final sources of knowledge.

Although Abdulaye’s religious beliefs remained fairly stable over the years, he described his conversion as a profound act of moral self-refashioning: ‘It was as if I were born again’. His spiritual rebirth involved a struggle to develop himself as a believer in a self-conscious manner, by living up to a new moral standard. In this context, religious awareness is more than a cognitive signifier; it suggests a new way of being in the world and, with that, the invocation of a new subjectivity. It could be argued that Abdulaye’s recommitment to Islam was a ‘technology of the self’—to use Foucault’s (1997) notion—in that he worked on himself ethically so as to transform himself into a morally appropriate person, not only in the eyes of others but first and foremost to his own satisfaction. Reformist Muslims’ emphasis on the subjectification of the self to a higher moral discipline suggests that it is not belief or doctrine *per se* that explains conversion, which may be motivated instead by the wish to constitute the self as a moral subject.

Importantly, although Abdulaye’s narrative shows that conversion is an act that displays a certain level of agency, the born-again subject is not necessarily an autonomous subject who chooses for himself. Abdulaye’s moral self-transformation was not identified

by him as a product of the self; it was engineered by God. Despite the problems he encountered with his family, who condemned his conversion as an act to distinguish himself from the local community, in Abdulaye's opinion he had no other choice but to convert, for he understood choice not as an expression of his own will but as something prescribed by God in order to become a good Muslim.

Abdulaye's new-found religiosity proved to be both an enlightening experience and a heavy responsibility, as expressed in the metaphor of the spiritual journey that he and many of his peers used to describe their conversion experiences (Janson, 2014: 131–133, 141–148). The goal with which they embarked on this journey was to reach moral perfection, but along the way they encountered challenges in the form taken by a 'good life' as it rose in their imagination, including music, dating, sports and other forms of leisure. Precisely these activities that make life pleasant for Gambian youth are thought to divert the believer from God and to undermine moral discipline and are therefore the target of what are described by Bayat (2007: 434–435) as fundamentalists' 'anti-fun campaigns'.

In his study of the Spanish colonization of the Tagalogs, the largest ethno-linguistic group in the Philippines, Rafael (1993: xvii–xix) points out that the Spanish words *conquista* (conquest), *conversión* (conversion) and *traducción* (translation) are semantically related. *Conversión* literally means the act of changing a thing into something else; in its more common usage it denotes the act of bringing someone over to a religion or a practice. Conversion, like conquest, can thus be a process of crossing over into the domain—territorial, emotional, religious, or cultural—of someone else and claiming it as one's own. *Conversión* also has a more prosaic meaning: the substitution of a word or proposition for another of equal significance. In this sense, it connotes translation. Of particular interest for my argument is Rafael's characterization of conversion as 'to give in by giving up what one wants' (1993: xvii). Although I am referring to a radically different ethnographic and historical setting than Rafael,¹² I find his approach useful in that the

moral self-transformation in which Muslim youth like Abdulaye are involved could be seen as a way of ‘conquering’ their youthful desires—described in terms of their *nafs*—and ‘translating’ them into the ideals of a pious lifestyle. From the narratives that I recorded during my field research it appeared that *nafs* stands for the mundane issues that tend to derail young people’s efforts to achieve a moral lifestyle. Several interlocutors described their conversion in terms of a *jihad*, not in the sense of religious warfare but an internal battle against their *nafs* that impede the cultivation of morality. Like the metaphor of the spiritual journey, the description of conversion in terms of an auto-jihad illustrates the great difficulties experienced by Gambian Muslim youth in their quest for a moral lifestyle.

To negotiate between morality and the good life, Abdulaye engaged in moral compromising. He stopped listening to popular music because he believed this was ‘Satanic’. Instead, he started listening to tape-recorded sermons by Salafi scholars. Furthermore, he replaced watching Nigerian Nollywood films with watching Islamic DVDs on the life of the Prophet. In an attempt to lead a moral life, he also stopped weightlifting when his body became too muscular and thus ‘too showy’. Instead of fitness training, he now plays basketball, which he believes does not contradict his moral lifestyle as long as he covers his body properly.¹³ That he stopped weightlifting does not mean that Abdulaye no longer cared about his body; he claimed that it is important for a Muslim man to groom himself for his wives. Although his wives found him attractive with a beard, he was, to some extent, willing to compromise on his apparel when he was invited for a job interview—though his willingness to trim his beard and wear a Western-style suit was not enough for his employer, who preferred a clean-shaven employee.

Abdulaye not only compromised on his appearance but also on his ethical principles. Although he had told me that he was unwilling to work for a bank because he considered interest *haram* (Islamically unlawful), he eventually accepted a job as a bank employee to be able to support his wives financially. Irrespective of the fact that his relatives and

friends told him that he was too young to engage in a polygamous marriage, he decided to marry a second wife in an effort to ‘discipline’ himself—acknowledging that women are his ‘weak point’. Another weak point was his pursuit of ‘luxury’—he liked fast cars, the latest models of mobile phones and designer perfumes. Although he was aware that his desire for Western consumption goods collided with Salafiyya’s frugal values, he legitimized his new mobile phone by arguing that he needed to make phone calls to Islamic scholars in Saudi Arabia. To embed his high-tech phone in his conception of morality, he changed the ringtone to Quranic recitation.

To achieve the good life he was dreaming of, it was important for Abdulaye to continue his education. To his great joy he received a scholarship from a French university, but he did not want to move because he was afraid that living in the Western world would lead him astray from religion. He tried to compromise his interest in a secular subject, French literature, by engaging in religious study. In his struggle with his desire for Western-style schooling and Western consumption goods, Abdulaye resembles the Tanzanian Pentecostal youth described by Stambach (2000). Although in accord with the Pentecostal discourse in Tanzania these youths reject Western culture, in practice they are drawn into Western consumerism because of the cultural capital associated with membership of Pentecostal churches. Aware of the contradiction between their religious ideology and their consumption patterns, they argue that as youth they can be ‘forever born again ... and again and again’ (Stambach, 2000: 178). Like the Tanzanian Pentecostal youth, Abdulaye legitimized his at times ‘un-Islamic’ conduct and preferences by underlining that he was ‘still young’ and involved in a learning process: ‘I’m only a student of Islam’. Moreover, he distinguished inventively between ‘small’ and ‘big sins’. Although realizing that several of his pursuits were in contradiction with his ideal of a moral lifestyle, he glossed over them by saying that they were not major moral transgressions but just ‘small sins’. After his graduation from the University of the Gambia

with high marks, Abdulaye was granted a ticket to Mecca by President Jammeh. Although he longed to make the pilgrimage he was also somewhat hesitant, since he knew he would have to adapt his lifestyle afterwards. Some of his mundane pursuits, which he now termed ‘small sins’, would be considered ‘big sins’ after his pilgrimage.

In a country where around 60 per cent of the population is below 24 years, Tablighi and Salafi youth are surely not the only Gambian actors who relate their youthful pursuits to Islam. Moreover, although approximately 95 per cent of the population is Muslim, Islam is not the only way to lead a moral life in Gambian society. Different groups of youth deploy different strategies in compromising between being young and being Muslim and these strategies are not necessarily of a pious or even religious nature (see also Masquelier, 2007). For example, during Ramadan many of Abdulaye’s peers present themselves as pious Muslims, while in other contexts they engage in pursuits like smoking or drinking alcohol that contradict religion. Along with their Muslim identity, they have reinvented notions of youthfulness, since their leisure activities collide with conventional understandings of ‘proper’ youthful behaviour in Gambian society. Abandoning the traditional cultural groups based on age-set (*kafoos*), many urban Gambian youth nowadays prefer to socialize in ‘ghettos’, or urban street hang-outs where young, often unemployed, men socialise as a way of killing time. The ghetto signals a significant social and generational change and is a particularly poignant sign of the recent era of neo-liberal reforms (see also Soares, 2010: 245).¹⁴

An example of a ‘ghetto boy’ is Abdulaye’s former friend Ahmed,¹⁵ who because of his school performance received a scholarship to study in Sudan. The outbreak of the civil war prevented him from travelling to Sudan and he then had to search for another challenge in his life, which he eventually found in the Tablighi Jama‘at. Under pressure of his family, who condemned his membership of the Jama‘at as a form of Muslim ‘extremism’, Ahmed eventually withdrew and joined a ghetto where he met with his

unemployed peers on a daily basis to drink tea, dream about a future life in ‘Babylon’ (a term derived from reggae music, referring to the West) and in the meantime wait for things to happen: ‘We spend our time in the ghetto because we don’t have much else to do. Life here is quite boring you know.’ For dispossessed urban youth like Ahmed Islam has only limited significance as a framework for self-representation.

What reformist Muslim youth like Abdulaye and the so-called ghetto boys like Ahmed have in common is that they share a similar social profile: they represent the lower-middle-class, have usually engaged in secular Western-style schooling and live in the city. Furthermore, both groups associate the ‘good life’ with a modern lifestyle, characterized by success (as represented by education, economic development in the form of a job and modern technology), as well as pleasure. Nevertheless, their interpretations of what ‘modernity’ involves differ. For reformist Muslims like Abdulaye a modern lifestyle implies that they turn their back on long-established cultural traditions and the religious practices of their parents; instead of the local community and the extended family they affiliate themselves with the global community of Muslims, the *umma*. The ghetto boys, by contrast, associate a modern lifestyle with an escape from local cultural norms and family obligations through a migration to the West. Ghetto boys’ desire to leave the Gambia for ‘Babylon’, that is, the Western world representing a place of unlimited possibilities and economic survival, is so strong that there is a special word for it in Gambian slang: ‘having nerves’. When my research assistant Sky consulted a doctor because of a stomach-ache, the first thing she asked him was whether he ‘had nerves’. This longing for a life in ‘Babylon’ contrasts sharply with reformist Muslim youths’ aversion to the Western world. The latter do not associate modernity with the West, but rather with the East where, in their opinion, Islam originated. Remarkably, whereas Salafis regarded Saudi Arabia as the cradle of Islam, many Tablighis associated India and Pakistan with a purer understanding and practice of Islam, arguing that ‘for a long time the Meccans were idol-worshippers’.

For most ghetto boys a migration to ‘Babylon’ is not granted and they fill the gap between dreams and actual possibilities with buying or fantasizing about Western consumer goods. In a similar vein, Salafis and Tablighis appropriate goods and other tropes from a Saudi Arabian or South Asian context as a means to get closer to what they regard as the heartland of the Muslim *umma*, as well as a hub of wealth and technology beyond the Western world. Noor (2009) speaks here of a kind of ‘reversed Orientalism’. For Gambian reformist Muslim youth Saudi Arabia and South Asia have acquired a certain mythical status as a region where purity coalesces with prosperity. In a sense, then, it could be argued that they promote a typical Orientalist view about Saudi Arabia and South Asia: rather than the Orient representing an inferior Other, for Gambian reformist Muslims the Orient is a superior Other.

The above-mentioned illustrates that Muslim youthful identities are fragmented and fluid. Albeit often described as a shift from one religious belief to another, or a transition from impiety to a moral lifestyle, cases like that of Abdulaye and Ahmed illustrate that rather than a one-way journey, conversion as a spiritual journey or an auto-jihad is a bumpy passage with neither a definite direction nor a fixed final destination. Not only is conversion not a unilinear path; also the life course does not necessarily unfold according to a developmental teleology from youth to adulthood. Within the neo-liberal world order that restricts their chances and opportunities, youngsters have to find new ways to become moral persons and deploy their youthful identity as an asset to become somebody.

Concluding remarks

Based on extensive ethnographic field research among different varieties of Muslims in the Gambia, in this article I have challenged common understandings of conversion by questioning both the older anthropological literature that focuses on conversion between religions, especially between ‘local’ traditions and ‘world’ religions, and the emergent

anthropological literature on Muslim piety that looks at the practice of morality from the perspective of coherence. I have done so by recording the conversion narrative of Abdulaye, who embodies a trajectory of religiosity that is common among reformist Muslim youth in the Gambia. In an attempt to break with his past in order to create a new religious present in the hope of a better future, Abdulaye converted first to the Tablighi Jama‘at and later reverted to Salafiyya. The case of his former friend Ahmed, who relapsed from the Jama‘at to the ghetto, demonstrates that in Muslim youths’ search for a better future, the Jama‘at not only competes with Salafiyya but also with a worldly lifestyle.

Questioning the assumption that Islamic reform creates more standardized or uniform ways of practising Islam, the ethnography presented here illustrates that it encourages the creation of an ever-increasing multiplicity of religious expressions. The fluidity of Muslim subjectivities and the porosity of boundaries between these subjectivities demonstrate the inadequacy of conventional assumptions of conversion to capture the complexity of the different ways of being young and Muslim in everyday life (cf. Masquelier, 2007). Far from a one-way trajectory from one religious tradition to another or from a-religiosity to piety, Abdulaye’s conversion maps the continuous making of moral compromises and a preparedness to reflect on the ambiguity of selfhood, in which the making of these moral compromises inevitably results. This moral compromising is rooted in reformist Muslims’ wish to return to an ‘authentic’ Islam, while their desires centre upon a modern lifestyle characterized by progress and pleasure. Their resulting religiosity is as much a coming to terms with the modern world as a rejection of that world—the latter being the stereotypical image widely promulgated in Western media after the events of 9/11.

In engaging with anthropological debates on conversion and morality, I have tried to contribute to the study of Islam by making a comparison with Pentecostalism. Although reformist Islam and Pentecostal Christianity are often portrayed as bounded and distinct

traditions, they mirror each other to a large extent in West Africa as appears particularly in their conception of conversion (Larkin and Meyer, 2006).¹⁶ Unlike many mainstream Muslims, who see it as their duty to convert other believers to Islam, reformist Muslims conceive of conversion in terms of a spiritual rebirth that lifts Muslims to a higher level of moral discipline. This reformist conception of conversion in terms of a spiritual rebirth is redolent of Pentecostal discourse.

In her seminal article *Make a Complete Break with the Past*, Meyer (1998) illustrates that through conversion Pentecostals dissociate themselves from their past in the form of local cultural traditions and extended family life. Their rupture with the past coincides with new notions of the self and belonging. Interestingly, Meyer sees converts' rupture with the past not merely as an aspect of Pentecostalism but as a feature of modernity itself, which brings together the conceptions of conversion as 'rupture' and 'continuity' that are central in the conversion debate. In order to break with the past and become born again, converts must engage in a dialectics of remembering and forgetting: 'It is essential to realize that the alleged break "from the past" is only made possible through a practice of remembrance in the course of which this "past" is constructed' (Meyer, 1998: 329). This notion of rupture with yet constant presence of the past is a paradigmatic feature of modern subjectivity (Meyer, 1998: 340; see also van der Veer, 1996). The analogy between the conceptualisation of conversion in terms of a break with the past and modernity's self-definition in terms of progress and continuous renewal explains why Pentecostal Christianity and reformist Islam resonate in so many different contexts.

As Larkin and Meyer (2006: 287–288) illustrate, the mirroring of Pentecostalism in reformist Islam, and vice versa, occurs in three main ways. First, similar to Pentecostal Christians reformist Muslims enact their desire to remake religious practice by purging it from local traditions and extricating it from its cultural context. This is most obvious in the way they celebrate their life-cycle rituals. To the chagrin of their families, reformist

Muslim youth perform their rituals in a simple way without any aspect of entertainment or ostentatious gift-giving. For Abdulaye marriage, for example, is no longer a festive, social matter between two families; he sees it as an agreement between two individuals who are willing to enter into a ‘sacred contract’ with God. Remarkably, the reformist idea of marriage as a ‘divine institution’ seems closer to the sacramental, monogamist view of marriage that characterizes Christianity than to the contractual, polygamist view of mainstream Islam. Second, both Pentecostals and reformist Muslims offer new ways of becoming ‘modern’ through religious practice and in terms of access to economic networks, material goods, and lifestyles associated with modernity, which are pursued through transnational links. Reformist Muslims like Abdulaye see themselves as globalised individuals who no longer affiliate with their cultural roots, but relate instead to the Indian subcontinent and Saudi Arabia, considered regions where religiosity coalesces with prosperity. In the third mirror, related to the preceding two, Pentecostalism and reformist Islam represent new eras in the globalisation of religion, with intensified interaction—both religiously and economically—occurring between West Africa, North America and Europe on the one hand, and West Africa, the Middle East and South Asia on the other hand.

By converting to reformist Islam, Abdulaye endeavoured to surpass the limits of locality and to dissociate himself from the ‘corrupt’ Western world by associating himself with the *umma*. Reformist Muslims’ new global subjectivity has social consequences. As appeared in Abdulaye’s narrative, his family did not understand his religious transformation and tried to push him to follow his twin brother’s example and migrate to the West. His new subjectivity thus alienated him from his family and the local community. This demonstrates that although conversion to reformist Islam is an act of moral self-refashioning, it has transformative power for Gambian society-at-large and for the Gambia’s implication in the modern world. Therefore, if the anthropology of Christianity and the anthropology of Islam have resided hitherto in distinct sub-disciplines,

the similarities in how Pentecostal Christians and reformist Muslims in West Africa articulate notions of personhood and belonging and interpretations of morality and modernity may call for a new conceptual framework that allows the anthropological study of Pentecostalism and reformist Islam within one field.

Rather than abandoning the concept of conversion altogether—as suggested by the Comaroffs (1991: 249–251), who argue that because of its European, Christian connotation it has limited analytical value—we should explore its multivalence by showing that it is a quality of moral self-transformation as much as a tool for bringing outsiders into the group. Taking this course we may conclude that, confronted with the multiple ways of being Muslim and the ambiguities that the search for a moral lifestyle imply, there is a wide variety of possible answers to the question that occupies Abdulaye and his peers, ‘How, for God’s sake, can I be a good Muslim?’ The ambivalence, hope and tragedy implied in this question should be taken seriously, rather than wiped out by the current anthropological preoccupation with ethical perfection. What ethnographic fieldwork on conversion therefore needs is an eye for the ambiguities, uncertainties and contradictions as the constitutive moments in converts’ lived experiences (cf. Schielke, 2009b).

Notes

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¹ Although I conducted interviews with young Muslim women as well, my focus here is on male youth, whose experiences of piety and leisure differ in many ways. For female youth's religiosity in the Gambia, see Janson (2014).

² The Tablighi Jama'at is a transnational Islamic missionary movement that originated in India and that propagates greater religious devotion and observance. Salafiyya, which is also known as Wahhabiyya in West Africa (though this term is often used by outsiders to describe the movement), strives to return to the Islam of the *Salaf*, the pious predecessors who lived at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and subscribes to a literalist interpretation of Islam based on the core texts of Islamic belief: the Quran and *hadith*.

³ *Tuubi* is used in both Wolof and Mandinka. It is derived from the Arabic *tawba*, the Quranic meaning of which is 'repentance' and by extension 'conversion' (see also Miran-Guyon, 2012: 101).

⁴ This appropriation is often referred to as 'African Christianity' (Gifford 1998). Somewhat paradoxically, whereas African Christianity is considered an entity in and of itself, the idea of an African Islam has been criticized severely because it formed the basis of French colonial policy with regard to Islam. However comforting the illusion of an 'African Islam' was for colonial administrators—who considered it to be more accommodating than 'Arab Islam'—it had, as Launay (2006: 190) points out, negative consequences for the

anthropological study of Islam in Africa. For a long time, anthropologists left the study of Islam to Orientalists, while themselves concentrating on decoding more ‘authentically’ African beliefs and practices.

5 Although this article is structured around the conversion narrative of one individual, the other biographies that I recorded during my field research present similar accounts of conversion as an act of moral self-fashioning (Janson, 2014). Although conversion narratives may add to a better understanding of how religious ideology plays out in daily life, they are nearly absent in Islamic studies—unlike in studies of Christianity, where testimonies authenticate the convert’s newly-adopted religiosity (Peacock, 1984: 94; Stromberg, 1993). This difference may be explained by the fact that speaking out is considered a form of standing out, while Islam prescribes modesty and resignation as core virtues.

6 The Tukulor originated in the Futa Toro region in Senegal and their desire to spread Islam led to migrations to the Gambia and other West African countries.

7 Ahmadiyya is an Islamic missionary movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in India in the 19th century, which is often suppressed as heretical in the Muslim world. For a more detailed overview of the religious landscape in the Gambia, see Janson (2014: 52–68).

8 During my field research I also came across the opposite, but much rarer, phenomenon: Salafis turning into Tablighis. Although direct conversion into Salafiyya occurs, Salafi trajectories—and not only in the Gambia but worldwide—often lead through traces of the Tablighi Jama‘at (Adraoui, 2009). My interlocutors described the indirect conversion into Salafiyya as ‘reversion’.

9 Although the study of religious reform usually focuses on activist Muslim youth (cf. Last, 1992), the special appeal of religion to the young is not characteristic of Islam. For example,

van Dijk (1999) illustrates how Pentecostal youth use their faith to challenge gerontocratic power structures in Malawian society, and Maxwell (2002: 186) goes as far as claiming that Pentecostalism in Africa can be perceived as a ‘youth movement’.

¹⁰ This new mode of belonging is not specific to the Tablighi Jama‘at and Salafiyya in the Gambia. Maxwell (2005: 6) points out that at the time of neo-liberal reform in Zimbabwe and beyond, Pentecostalism was able to provide those struggling for survival with a network of support and security.

¹¹ Although Abdulaye’s experiences are in many respects similar to his peers, in other respects they differed. Unlike many other Gambian youths who lack the means to attain the status of adulthood through education, employment, marriage and setting up their own households, Abdulaye had attended higher education, had married two wives and had been offered a scholarship to study in France.

¹² According to the Comaroffs (1991) and Asad (1993), conversion is so embedded in a colonial Christian context that it cannot be applied to other religions and other contexts. Since my interlocutors did employ conversion as a theological category, my point here is that conversion is applicable as an analytical category if we uncouple it from its particular religious and historical context and expand its use to comprise the attempt to break with the past with the aim of ‘returning’ to ‘correct’ religious practice.

¹³ A dress code applies not only to Muslim women, but also to men, who are obliged to cover their body up to their knees and to cover their heads with a prayer cap or turban.

¹⁴ The social phenomenon of young men passing the time in street hang-outs is widespread in Africa and beyond (e.g. Mains, 2007; Osella and Osella, 1998; Weiss, 2008; Soares, 2010; Masquelier, 2013).

¹⁵ Abdulaye terminated their friendship because of their conflicting opinions about how to lead a moral life.

¹⁶ This mirroring is less due to a direct influence of Pentecostalism on reformist Islam, since Pentecostals are of marginal significance in the Gambia, and more to independent adaption to similar circumstances. As Frederiks points out, the British colonial government was conservative in its policy of allowing new Christian churches in the Gambia, as a result of which Pentecostalism never became popular in the country (2003: 365–366). There are some Pentecostal churches that have been able to establish local branches in Gambian society. However, these churches have remained small and attract followers especially among migrants (Frederiks, 2003: 369–375).

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