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Divine Mandates and Political Realities: Exploring Power, Religion, and Transition in The Gambia

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Abstract

This article analyses the role of religious symbolism and religiosity during The Gambia's autocracy (1994–2017) and its democratic transition (2017–2023). Former autocratic ruler, Yahya Jammeh, exploited religious symbolism to legitimise his authority, leading to crackdowns, extrajudicial punishment, and political repression. Drawing on community engagements and interviews with 61 civil-society members, political actors, community stakeholders, and girls in rural and urban areas across The Gambia's West Coast Region, the findings highlight the influence of cultural and value systems, particularly the intersection of religion and politics, in shaping the country's autocracy. Exploring some of the nuances of religious ideology and religious symbols concerning the state, The Gambia's political history allows for deeper examinations of power dynamics within the broader cultural and societal context. By adopting a multidimensional perspective of power that incorporates religion, cultural values, and ethnic dimensions, this article offers new perspectives for analysing power structures and transformations in diverse socio-political settings.

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Keywords

The Gambia, religion, power, autocracy, Jammeh

Introduction

In The Gambia's complex socio-political landscape, religious symbolism was exploited by former President Yahya Jammeh to consolidate and reinforce his autocratic rule (1994–2017). With a long history of human rights violations, repression, and non-democratic elections (Hartmann, 2017; Hultin et al., 2017; Saine, 2002), this article conceives authoritarianism as, “patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over, whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice” (Glasius, 2018: 517). Hultin et al. (2017: 326) suggest that in the The Gambia, “there is evidence of democratic participation alongside autocracy and authoritarianism, and Jammeh was able to navigate between the two.” Following the ousting of Jammeh, the realities of the autocracy, once suppressed by force and a culture of silence, are now giving way to the emergence of collective narratives, which are shaping the country's ongoing democratic transition. The Gambia's Truth Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission (TRRC) uncovered narratives of sexual violence, systemic murder, torture, dissent, and the utilisation of government and religious institutions, and religious symbolism to reinforce Jammeh's autocracy, influencing both cultural and political norms in the country (TRRC Final Report Volumes 1–16, 2021).

The Gambia is a religious country with 95.7 per cent identifying as Muslim and 4.2 per cent as Christian (Odeh, 2021). Religion can be defined as “a propitiation or conciliation of power superior to man, which is believed to direct and control the cause of nature and human life” (Odeh, 2021: 70). Building on this definition, this article also grapples with religion as a source of hope, morality, and values for many, which ultimately shape norms.

To leverage religious norms and consolidate political power, Jammeh purported himself as a devout Muslim. He was always seen carrying the Quran and prayer beads. During his presidency, he built mosques, where he delivered state speeches and organised state-sponsored Quranic recitations, mandated that school-girls wear veils in the Islamic tradition, obtained honorary religious titles, interfered with the Muslim calendar, altered Eid celebration dates for the populace, enforced a four-day work week to honour Fridays as holy days for prayers, and declared The Gambia an Islamic Republic (Hultin et al., 2017; Nyanzi, 2013; *Reuters News*, 2013).

This article aims to provide an analysis of the role of religious symbolism and religiosity during The Gambia's autocracy and its democratic transition. While there are assumptions that posit that religiosity is an “ally of authoritarianism and secularism of democracy” (Fish, 2002: 21), this article demonstrates how religiosity underpinned both the autocracy and is contributing to The Gambia's democracy.

Hunwick's (1992) research on political Islam in Nigeria and West Africa highlights religion as a driver of political change. The article herein extends that focus to The Gambia,

emphasising the role of religious interpretation in social and political transformations (Hunwick, 1992). In Watt's (1966) writings on political relevance and religious ideology, he suggests that not enough is written about the role of religious ideology in the study of Africa and its potential to evolve, contributing to the solutions facing Africa's problems. Watts' work is situated within East African contexts. During the time of his study, Islam did not seem to contribute to state-building, but rather served as means to constrain politicians' actions that might offend Muslim sentiment (Watt, 1966). Contrarily, The Gambian case shows how Jammeh used religious symbolism and values towards perceptions of state-building and leadership, which allowed him to act without many constraints in influencing and controlling the populace. Furthermore, Soares (2007) emphasises the need for a more comprehensive analysis of Islam and Muslim societies in Africa and how they engage with their faith, considering broader social, political, and economic complexities. Thus, this article unearths the often neglected linkages between power, religion, culture, ethnic dimensions, and governance. In The Gambia, religion seems to be a delicate but important thread, weaving together both questions and solutions towards understanding The Gambia's political history and democratic future.

This article presents findings derived from community engagements and interviews in The Gambia with 61 respondents, aiming to assess the socio-cultural and political landscape while uncovering power dynamics and narratives. Engagements involved storytelling sessions and interviews in rural and urban settings, with a primary focus on Jola communities, known for their egalitarian origins, commitment to preserving their traditions, and their socio-political history with power and powerlessness, as a once marginalised ethnic minority group that many suggest became powerful during the rise of Jammeh, a fellow Jola man.

This article unpacks the unpredictable and, seemingly, irrational behaviour of the autocrat. It also tells a deeper, more nuanced narrative of how religion played a role in Gambians navigating authoritarian submission, resistance, and democratic aspirations, as well as the religiosity of a country, the social stratification, history, and superstitions surrounding an ethnic minority group. It also analyses the complexity and contradictions that inspire hope for a democratic future. This article explores nuances within religious symbolism and autocratic leadership, summarises research findings on religious norms and values in The Gambia, analyses Jammeh's exploitation of religion to maintain autocratic rule, and explores the implications for democratic transition. This article incorporates key findings and textual analysis of diverse literature sources. It clarifies that examples from the Quran and Bible serve to highlight Jammeh's manipulation of religious consciousness, without suggesting any parallels to religious figures. Examining Jammeh's abuse of godly power provides an interesting opportunity to unpack the significance of the cultural and value systems that enveloped The Gambia during his regime.

Abusing Religious Symbolism to Advance an Autocracy

O'Brien (2003) notes that religious symbols in Africa often play a significant role in politics, reinforcing loyalties within religious communities and defining relations with the

state. He suggests that, in countries like Senegal, holy symbols are more effective at addressing national issues than speeches by secular politicians. He claims that these religious speeches influence relationships with the state. In unpacking how people attribute meaning to symbols through shared experiences as articulated within symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), this study delves into the interpretations and impact of religious symbols, particularly deference and resistance to autocratic leadership in The Gambia. O'Brien (2003) discusses how religious symbolism shapes societal arrangements and power dynamics. As Gambians navigated such power dynamics and norms, it is critical to explore Jammeh's instrumentalization of religious symbols, how Gambians interpreted them, and its shaping of the local culture and broader social arrangements.

Jammeh strategically employed religious symbols in his public persona and speeches to project a compelling image of religious authority and shape public perceptions. He manipulated cultural interpretations of these symbols to forge connections between his political power and religious values in the eyes of his followers. Marx (1970 in Surin, 2013) observes that elites are able to assert divinely ordained positions through religion. They exploit religion to reinforce social hierarchies by promoting obedience and submission. This power dynamic seems to be reflected in The Gambia under Jammeh's rule. By obtaining honorary membership into the Supreme Islamic Council, Jammeh leveraged "a façade of religious legitimacy behind which he could manipulate religious beliefs and sentiments intended to bolster his political objectives" (TRRC Final Report Volumes 1–16, no. 5, 2021: 1).

To reinforce his autocratic agenda, Jammeh leveraged religious symbolism and exploited the religious consciousness of Gambians. To suppress dissent (Saine, 2002), he emulated the unpredictable and punitive portrayals of God, as depicted in Abrahamic narratives, by enforcing extrajudicial killings and random punishments (Perfect, 2010). Additionally, he sought to cripple the judiciary by attacking judges, undermining constitutional mandates, and acting outside of the constitution in order to be seen as the ultimate judge (Darboe, 2022a, 2022b). This resembles Abrahamic religions where final judgement is often associated with divine power. Additionally, he purported himself as a sort of deliverer for his ethnic group, Jolas, to build a loyal following (Hultin et al., 2017). Jammeh also claimed to have healing powers, pretending to perform miracles documented within Islam and Christianity to elicit praise and showcase his supremacy (Cassidy and Leach, 2009).

Building on that, Jammeh asserted his legacy as a grandson of a very powerful marabout (Cassidy and Leach, 2009) in order to capitalise on the spiritual mysticism associated with Jolas. Spiritual powers are passed down from generations of Jola men, and Jammeh's emphasis on his ancestry enabled him to exploit this. In doing so, Jammeh wanted to be regarded for his metaphysical strength and discernment, proving to be powerful on both the religious and spiritual fronts. Lastly, Jammeh constructed himself as a defender of religious values (Nyanzi, 2013). By aggressively scaling up the armed forces and developing the persona of a strong military leader (Dwyer, 2023), he manipulated the symbolism of the militarised strength of God in the Holy Quran and Bible. This

symbolism was important in his aim to protect religious values over Western values. Therefore, he also went after homosexuality, human rights defenders, and any other “Western” agendas that were constructed as a threat to Islam. In doing so, Jammeh sought to develop strategic alliances with Islamic republics for protection and economic security, but also to be regarded by those republics and Gambians alike for his religious supremacy (Nyanzi, 2013).

Research Methods

The primary researcher’s upbringing in The Gambia during the time of Jammeh’s autocracy and her decade-long professional experience working towards The Gambia’s civil society development in the local non governmental organisation and international policy sectors enabled access to various spaces and deep insights into the country’s socio-cultural, religious, and political landscape. Focusing on human rights, democratisation, and gender in The Gambia contributed to building trust and connections within the policy and advocacy spaces, as well as within rural and urban communities. This granted access to interlocutors and research respondents and enabled a gender balance among them. Furthermore, it granted entry into political, religious, and leadership spaces. By leveraging existing and new connections, this research benefitted from data collection (April–October 2022) in the West Coast Region: in three rural communities in Foni, commonly known as Jola-land (Bwiam, Kanwally, Kalagi), two rural Jola settlements outside of Foni (Kartong, Berending), and in urban communities in Banjul/greater Kombos area (Sukuta, Serekunda, Banjul). The primary data was facilitated by referrals from knowledgeable persons in the field, interlocutors, and participant snowball sampling. The study aimed to gather a wide range of perspectives from various demographics within the Jola communities, including different age groups, genders, religious/spiritual beliefs, ethnicities, political views, professional backgrounds, and community affiliations. This approach was taken to reflect the diverse makeup of the broader population and to reduce any potential biases in the study’s findings.

Primary evidence was collected in two ways – through consultative interviews and through storytelling sessions. Eleven consultative interviews were conducted among multi-aged (25–70+), multi-ethnic respondents in both rural and urban settings. Respondents included community leaders and members, civil society activists, political actors and analysts, spiritual/religious conveners, and historians. Table 1 provides further details about the interview respondents as well as the codes used in the sections that follow when referring to quotes by them.

The broader study was also interested in the ways the autocracy and its use of religious symbolism affected girls and the ways that they conceptualised power. This cohort is often neglected in research on The Gambia. Yet, they are a vital segment of Gambian society that were exposed to both an autocracy and a nascent democracy. The TRRC report also identified that teenage girls were particularly victimised by the Jammeh administration (TRRC Final Report Volumes 1–16, 2021). As Bittaye-Jobe explores in her work on state violence in The Gambia, women and girls only comprised 69 of the

Table 1. Consultative Interview Schedule.

Consultative Interviews	Code	Date	Gender	Location
Civil Society Respondent	CS1	2 July 2022	F	Serekunda
Civil Society Respondent	CS2	7 July 2022 and 28 September 2022	F	Bwiam and Banjul
Civil Society Respondent	CS3	8 June 2022 and 12 August 2022	M	Foni and Serekunda
Community Leader	CL1	4 June 2022	F	Foni
Community Leader	CL2	8 June 2022	M	Foni
Community Member-Caterer	CM1	15 July 2022	F	Foni
Community Member-Farmer	CM2	1 August 2022	M	Foni
Historian	H1	10 June 2022	M	Serekunda
Political Analyst	PA1	28 September 2022	F	Banjul
Political Analyst	PA2	27 April 2022	M	Foni
Religious Leader/Educator	RL1	12 August 2022	M	Serekunda

Table 2. Storytelling Session Schedule.

Storytelling session locations	Code	Date	Number of girls
Berending	S1	28 May 2022	7
Bwiam	S2	23 April 2022	11
Kanwally	S3	7 May 2022	9
Kalagi	S4	4 June 2022	5
Kartong	S5	21 May 2022	10
Sukuta	S6	14 May 2022	8
Total			50

300 testimonies that were obtained during the TRRC (Bittaye-Jobe, 2021). Therefore, to further explore gendered and inter-generational power narratives and dynamics, six storytelling sessions were facilitated in each of the above-mentioned Jola communities and in Sukuta with teenage girls, ages 18 and 19. Table 2 provides details about the storytelling sessions as well as the codes used to refer to the sessions in quotes in the discussion below.

To ensure the protection of research respondents, ethical considerations included obtaining culturally appropriate permissions to engage relevant communities and stakeholders, informed consent and confidentiality agreements, and the use of sensitivity mainstreaming in facilitating engagements. Identifying information has been anonymised to ensure participant safety and privacy.

The Significance of Religion

Recurring themes of cultural norms, community cohesion, silence, and fear emerged, with religion and politics at the forefront. Discussions across research respondents contributed to the notion that religion was seen as both a cause of submission to authoritarian leadership and a potential solution for democratic aspirations, where forgiveness and justice were seen as integral to a successful democratic transition. For example, political power was perceived as dominance, exemplified by the former president's control and citizens' powerlessness. Thus, in describing power dynamics in their communities, girls often pointed to Jammeh as an example of "ultimate power because he could tell anybody what to do, and because he was president you had to listen to him" (S2). In fact, to many of the girls, being president was seen as the most powerful job that one could aspire towards. In discussing their futures, a few girls wanted to be president and most wanted to be in political positions that were deemed close to the president, like vice president, ministers, and government officials. Girls in Kanwally, Kartong, and Sukuta stated the following:

I want to be president. I know first I will suffer to get it, but I can do it (S3).

I want to be a minister in the government, collecting money. I want a comfortable life (S5).

I want to be the vice president so I can enjoy myself. When you have money you can enjoy yourself. I want to contribute to national development, but also take care of myself and family (S6).

Furthermore, Jammeh's possession of power was often attributed to divine authority or supernatural abilities, where some respondents claimed that "he knew how to use spiritual charismatic power," or that he was powerful because he was "well-versed in the Quran" (CS2, CM2, and RL1). Moreover, the study showed that though there were many that were critical of Jammeh, not believing in his sovereignty, spirituality, or holy power, some believed that Jammeh was a supernatural force. Informal discussions with multi-aged male community members in Foni suggested that some believed that he was put in office by God, and others believed that he was a holy man who deserved their submission. Jammeh asserted that he was empowered by God to rule. Therefore, compliance to the autocracy was often seen as deference or compliance to God's will. In an expert statement made before the TRRC, Saine states that in The Gambia, "the belief that a leader is sanctioned and installed by God, is commonly shared by all- the sub-text of which is: one does not challenge leaders installed by God, because when you do, you challenge God" (Saine 2021 cited in TRRC Final Report Volumes 1–16, no. 5, 2021: 2). While some respondents shared this general belief, sentiments like God knows best, Allah knows all, Allah is just, and God has mercy, were often used among male/female respondents and teenage girls, when describing difficult times during the autocratic period; both as a way to explain their resignation, and as an expression of faith that things would get better.

The autocratic period was marked by a culture of silence, which can be attributed to several influences. According to some respondents, silence was embraced out of the fear of undermining such deference to Jammeh and in some cases deference to God's will. For example, discussions among respondents demonstrated a strong desire, particularly among girls and women, to be within the will of God, even if it meant suffering. Both women and girls suggested that "suffering was a natural part of life" (CL1) and that one must embrace religious imperatives like "morality," "truth," "purity," and "obedience" to deal with life's hardships (S1). Discussions among respondents also pointed to the tendency to not speak about Jammeh due to the additional fear of spies, unpredictable exhibitions of force, and media repression by the Jammeh regime. One respondent claimed, "we couldn't talk about it ... there was no one to report it to, so we had to endure it" (CL2).

In addition to wanting to be within the will of God, respondents explained that the culture of silence could also be seen as a religious motivation to care for your neighbours (CS2). According to discussions in the field, many Gambians knew that simply having a neutral discussion about politics, let alone a critical conversation about Jammeh, could land one in jail as opinions were often misconstrued or could be used against them by authority spies. Abstaining from political discussions was a way to "protect their neighbours from jail or worse" (PA2). Additionally, understanding that a neighbour may be a primary source of income or protection for families also prompted Gambians to not talk about these things for fear of causing suffering among families (CS2).

Literature on power in this area has largely centred on dominance. The findings contribute to the existing literature on power by unravelling the multifaceted dimensions of power within the context of The Gambia, providing valuable insights into the complexities of power relations within an autocratic and postcolonial context. This offers new perspectives for analysing religious and power structures and transformations in diverse socio-political settings.

Religious Values and Norms in the Gambia

To grasp Jammeh's use of religious symbolism and power, we must first explore Gambian society's religious values and norms. Examining religious identity formation and the interplay between perceptions of religious and spiritual traditions reveals how Jammeh harnessed religious consciousness and mysticism fears to consolidate power.

Discussions revealed that the Gambian people are often motivated by morality, underpinned by religious values, which are fostered through home training and religious education (S5). Thus, religious education is highly respected. Enrolment in religious education systems in The Gambia is common, where the curriculum strongly emphasises the development of religious identity through prayer and religious studies (CS2). Early on, children learn the expectations of being a "good Muslim" or a "good Christian." They also embrace religious and cultural precedents that shape gender norms and values, particularly for girls, who are taught to be modest and abstain from sexual immorality (RL1; Touray, 2006). According to storytelling sessions and discussions among

religious conveners, both girls and boys are taught discipline, devotion, and obedience as part of their religious education.

In demonstrating an example of youth and religious identity, Janson's (2014) study on Gambian youth and religiosity explores how Gambian youth are resonating with the Tablighi Jama movement, sacrificing relationships with their family, friends, and departing from their old ways of life. Originating from South Asia, this movement seeks to achieve a life of genuine and embodied Muslim values and identity amidst a modern society. The study herein also notes a religiosity among rural teenage girls. In storytelling sessions, girls expressed a strong desire to be "within the will of God." Morality, truth, and purity were seen as pivotal to receiving blessings both in this life and the afterlife. These ideals influenced their attitudes towards future marriage, wifehood, and motherhood aspirations, where these milestones in a woman's life are seen as pleasing to God. One girl suggested that, "When you make your husband happy, God rewards you and makes you happy" (S3).

While traditional spiritual religions are practised by less than 1 percent of Gambians, many Muslims and Christians engage in ethno-traditional practices that are seen more as cultural heritage than religious practice (Nyanzi, 2013). However, there are occasional disagreements among Gambians, who view traditional spirituality as conflicting with Christianity or Islam. Within both religions, power that exists outside of a monotheistic framework is often considered occult and sacrilegious. Consequently, Gambians often hold superstitions and demonstrate mistrust towards spiritual beliefs that involve demi-gods or life forces (RL1). However, in an interview, spiritual powers are described as communication with ancestors:

Ancestors can speak through people when they faint or are unconscious. If your forefathers were supposed to do something, the ancestors can speak through the younger person that has fainted. This young person wouldn't have known about this so it is apparent that this is a message from the ancestors (CS2).

Supernatural spirituality was also described as a "gift from angels" that offered them protection, helped them dissolve marriages, and allowed them to realise their goals (S3). For Jolas, who are most commonly associated with Gambian indigenous spirituality, nature possesses power, where Jolas set up traditional worship centres (H1) and pray for fertility, seek revenge (S2), or leverage for healing properties (Madge, 1998). While most of the Jola girls and community members maintained their Islamic identity, they also mentioned the importance of their traditional spiritual belief systems. One respondent offered, "These spiritual things, they are a part of us.... The old women that lead the traditions at Fankaliya bring young girls there for them to learn these spiritual gifts. We go because this is very important. We don't want the traditions and these spiritual connections to die" (S1).

According to one respondent, "Gambians used to be so united. We did not look at religion, or power, or class. Neighbours were together like families. Christians, Muslims, we celebrated everything. Jammeh changed the culture" (CS1). Although Jammeh's rule

allegedly led to polarisation among religious and spiritual worshippers, as well as the suppression of institutions challenging his divine authority, The Gambia is still recognised for its religious tolerance (Odeh, 2021). Odeh (2021) compares the contrasting dynamics of ethnic diversity and religious tolerance in The Gambia, theorised as religious freedom, with the polarised ethnic and extremist religious tensions in Nigeria, which often result in ethno-religious violence. According to Odeh (2021), Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, could learn from The Gambia, the smallest mainland country in Africa. Unlike Nigeria, The Gambia fosters a culture of tolerance through interfaith marriages, blended families, and active participation in inter-religious festivities, extending beyond personal domains and into the political sphere.

These sentiments of unity and tolerance are also suggested by:

Gambian society is so interwoven. They are intermarried. Politically, people support people on tribal lines. But on a larger scale, people – particularly the younger generation, we don't really look at the tribal lines. My younger brother married a Jola woman. Another younger brother married a Mandinka. In our compound, a lot of languages are spoken. You see more people coming together as Gambians not necessarily looking at the ethnicity or culture (CS3).

Gambians have deep-rooted social and political connections to religion. Discussions and community engagements indicate that religious perspectives and convictions shape how conflicts, justice, ethics, and truth are perceived and approached (PA1). Consequently, stories and examples from holy books are often used in social and political contexts to convey moral lessons and influence behaviour. However, in contending with the dual characterisation of God in the Quran and Bible as both a bestower and a punisher, research participants suggested that it may have been difficult for Gambians to discern the difference between personal political oppression and religious consequences for transgressions (CS2). Interviews with civil society activists uncovered that in their interactions with victims of the autocracy, particularly those that were sexually abused and forced to labour on Jammeh's farms, some felt that they could not question the violence they endured because it was delivered by a president and regime that God empowered to rule (CS2). This was also mentioned to some degree in informal discussions among older women in Foni. Similarly, Bittaye-Jobe (2021) in her study on the impact of state violence on women in The Gambia, highlights a consultation conducted by the International Center for Transitional Justice, where rural women suggested that the violence they faced as a result of the Jammeh regime was not perceived as a human rights violation. She provides a quote from a female victim: "As president, Jammeh had the right to tell us what to do; we would be wrong to say no" (Bittaye-Jobe, 2021: 5).

Emulating the Wrath of God to Enforce Autocratic Rule

The TRRC report revealed Jammeh's utilisation of power, security apparatus, and weaponization of government institutions to terrorise Gambians. The police, military, paramilitary forces, and high-ranking officials, including Jammeh, perpetrated gross

human rights violations. Men, women, and children endured extrajudicial killings, rape, torture, drug manipulation, forced disappearance, arbitrary arrests, and various forms of sexual, mental, and physical abuse (TRRC Final Report Volumes 1–16, 2021). The link between state-orchestrated violence and a climate of fear is clearly identified by the following interview respondent: “Police and soldiers were used to instigate violence by the Jammeh regime. There has been a culture of fear for over a decade. Police and soldiers are still associated with violence and brutality” (PA1).

Indiscriminate in his wrath, many of the study’s respondents detailed how Jammeh targeted women, girls, the elderly, and those with disabilities. Discussions suggested that Jammeh targeted vulnerable groups to undermine traditional masculinity norms, challenging men’s role as protectors to show that nobody was exempt from his wrath or judgement (CS3).

To reinforce this sentiment, he also targeted judges who failed to rule in his favour. Using threats of force and other intimidation tactics, he sought to cripple and compromise the judiciary (Perfect, 2010). Some respondents viewed this as a calculated strategy to limit avenues for redress among ordinary citizens. Gambians are known for valuing peace and for prioritising conflict resolution and injustices through judicial and religious channels, as guided by the Quran and Bible (PA1). Jammeh, however, needed to be seen as the ultimate authority. Both religious texts assert God as the sole authority and judge (Quran 18: 26, TNQ, 2023; Isaiah 33:22, NIV, 2023), and Jammeh emulated this by acting beyond his constitutional limits and the law, without providing justification. In exercising the ultimate judgement of life and death, “nearly 150 people were killed between 2000 and 2010,” in connection to Jammeh’s force (Darboe, 2022a, 2022b). Jammeh made the death penalty legal in 1995 (Perfect, 2010) and conducted a mass execution of prisoners on death row, without due process, ending a 27-year moratorium (*BBC News*, 2017). Opposition leaders and journalists were imprisoned, tortured, and killed while in custody for their resistance, dissent, and failure to “sing Jammeh’s praises” (*BBC News*, 2017; Hartmann, 2017; Perfect, 2010). Civilians also died for their dissidence. Most notably, fourteen students were shot dead by security forces for protesting (Perfect, 2010).

Studying the autocracy in The Gambia also necessitates the discussion of Gambians’ agency and resistance. Interviews reinforced that many in The Gambia believe that devotion to God must not compromise His people (RL1, PA1). Many citizens and religious leaders, including the Christian community used this religious imperative to counter/resist the efforts of the regime but were often arrested, tortured, and suppressed (TRRC Final Report Volumes 1–16, 2021).

Often concerned with disloyalty, Jammeh leveraged The Gambia’s armed forces to attack, imprison, and kill people close to him, including members of his own cabinet, party (Perfect, 2010), armed forces (Dwyer, 2023), members of his family (Darboe, 2022a, 2022b), and fellow Jolas. One respondent stated: “Jammeh as a Jola himself went after Jolas that he perceived to be disloyal. About 90% of Jolas voted for Jammeh in the elections. He was looking to target that 10%” (PA1). In moving in seemingly unpredictable, yet calculated ways, Jammeh was manipulating, and simultaneously modelling

the precarious, yet unquestioned wrath of God. In a study on how authoritarian leaders use security forces to command power, Dwyer (2023) posits that uncertainty was most instrumental in controlling The Gambia's armed forces. She claims that such strategy "involved consistently limiting the ability to predict who would be significant, what rules would be applied, and when violence would be used within the forces" (Dwyer, 2023: 149). According to the study, this strategic use of unpredictability has been studied among other autocratic rulers and theorised as institutional arbitrariness, which refers to "a ruler's unchecked and unaccountable power, exercised in a way that cannot be predicted" (Dwyer, 2023: 150). In Abrahamic religions, it is often believed that God takes a heavy hand in punishing people who go against His will. How and when God exacts such vengeance is unknown to the common man. Examples from the holy texts include the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Quran 11:82–83, TNQ, 2023; Genesis 19:24, NIV, 2023), the flooding that destroyed the world (Quran 7:59–64, TNQ, 2023; Genesis 6:9–9:17, NIV, 2023), and the future damnation that will befall the world on judgement day (Quran 55:26–27, TNQ, 2023; Revelation 21: 1, NIV, 2023).

In analysing the relationship between Jammeh and the citizens of The Gambia in juxtaposition with the wrath of God in the Abrahamic religions, God's wrath is believed to be mighty and touch everyone, except his chosen people (Quran 39:68–71, TNQ, 2023; John 14: 2–3, NIV, 2023). Despite Jammeh's exile, some believe he retains power and will return to rule (CS2). Findings reveal that though there is little overall support for his return to rule in The Gambia, lingering loyalty and allegiances to Jammeh remain in anticipation of benefits upon his return.

Deception and Deliverance – Jammeh's Support of the Jolas

Jammeh was an important symbol for Jolas. They were proud to be Jolas because someone big was behind them.... He appointed people to high positions.... When Jammeh came into office, he restored the dignity of Jolas. To Jolas, Jammeh was part of them—even when he did bad things. They really liked him and it was difficult for people to turn their backs on him. They continued to vote him into office (CS3).

The above quote suggests that Jammeh enjoyed widespread reverence and popularity, particularly among the Jolas (CS3). This esteem predated his infamous reputation. To grasp this profound connection, it is essential to consider Jammeh's ethnic background as a Jola man and understand the historical context of the Jolas in The Gambia, primarily conveyed through oral traditions. According to community leaders and scholars, the history of the Jolas – believed to be one of the earliest groups in the country – is enveloped in mystery. Prior to colonialism, the Jolas maintained their isolation in the forests, avoiding interaction and trade with other ethnic groups. This sparked rumours and suspicions among other ethnic groups regarding the perceived spiritual powers wielded by the Jolas due to their close connection with nature. Today, though Jolas practise Islam and Christianity, many continue to incorporate elements of animism and ancestral worship, often leading to misunderstandings and stigmatisation from other ethnic groups (CS3).

Oral histories shed light on the historical social standing of Jolas. Discussions among respondents reveal that due to the stigma surrounding their spiritual practices and their minority status, Jolas were “marginalised” in Gambian society. Assigned subservient roles in domestic settings, maids and watchmen were often called Jolas, regardless of their actual ethnicity. This association created a symbolic association between the Jola name and servitude, causing shame and discouraging Jolas from speaking their language. To blend in and avoid identification, many Jolas adopted the languages of the ethnic majorities – Wolof and Mandinka (CL2).

It is commonly believed that Jammeh’s rise to power evoked pride among Jolas, as they saw someone from their own ethnic group occupying the country’s highest office (CL2, CS3). In exploiting the depictions illustrated in the holy texts, where the Prophet (Quran 33:40, TNQ, 2023) or Messiah (John 20:31, NIV, 2023) came to lead their followers to paradise, Jammeh portrayed himself as a deliverer for Jolas. By following his leadership, Jammeh promised them elevated lives. This strategy sought to uplift the historically stigmatised Jolas from generational subjugation, as they were encouraged to aspire to higher positions beyond domestic roles (CL2). In purporting his role as deliverer for Jolas, he also “sparked ethnic tensions when he suggested in a public forum that Jolas were more Gambian than Mandinkas” (PA2). This assertion can also be seen as a play on religious symbolism, where the idea of a “chosen people” – a group that is regarded for being close to and set aside by God – are prominently reflected in both the Quran and Bible (Quran 7:130–137, TNQ, 2023; Exodus 3:17, NIV, 2023). Furthermore, Jammeh leveraged his power to appoint Jolas to influential positions in the government and various sectors (Hultin et al., 2017). According to Dwyer (2023), authoritarian leaders maintain power by relying on structural approaches that involve the recruitment of relatives and co-ethnics into powerful positions.

The prison director and the minister of interior were from the same tribe as Jammeh. They enabled extrajudicial killings for Jammeh and unlawful imprisonment in mile two, without going through due process. They buried evidence that could implicate Jammeh. He also appointed a speaker of the National Assembly, somebody from his own ethnic group and further, a relative of his mother. General Badjie, also one of Jammeh’s tribes’ men, enabled mass human rights violations. These were his frontline defenders (PA2).

Jammeh was able to get away with heinous crimes with impunity due the strategic positions he gave to his fellow Jola men. This lack of accountability led to narratives about his invincibility, which fed perceptions of his untouchable and miraculous holy power (CL2).

Pretending to Perform Miracles to Elicit Praise

Kanilai farm, there people could farm and eat. But if you refused, they would take you to the president and he would see you as his anti. He would make you a victim. Even civil servants were made to work on the farm. I led a team there to farm to show solidarity with him. If he knows you have been working in the area and you haven’t come to work on the farm, it

would be a problem. You have to praise him and speak well of his initiatives. You dare not say no. You have to accept and justify his actions (CS3).

Jammeh exploited the consciousness of religious miracles to enhance his perceived divine authority. Christianity and Islam reference the ability of Jesus and Prophet Muhammad to miraculously feed the masses (Mathew 14: 13–21, NIV, 2023; Sunan an-Nasa'i, 3387). To influence Gambians' perception of his holy provision, Jammeh frequently showcased his ability to feed the masses, with personal sightings of him throwing food from large vehicles. This spectacle mirrored a biblical narrative of God's miraculous manna provision in the desert (Exodus 16:1–36, NIV, 2023). Jammeh also established a significant farm in his hometown, Kanilai, promoting it as The Gambia's agricultural cornerstone. While some Gambians were forced to work there, many volunteered with the aim to earn Jammeh's favour. Respondents noted that religious duty and a moral conviction led many to view labouring on the land as integral to human survival and societal contribution (CS3), akin to the suffering of the chosen people in religious texts that laboured in Egypt before their liberation (Quran 44:30–32, TNQ, 2023; Exodus 1:11–14, NIV, 2023).

Jammeh also exploited the consciousness of divine healing (Quran 26:80, TNQ, 2023; Matthew 4:23–24, NIV, 2023) in asserting his alternative healing agenda for HIV. He claimed to have discovered a cure for HIV through the identification of specific herbs mentioned in the Quran (Cassidy and Leach, 2009). While some respondents harboured scepticism about these "miracles," many believed that Jammeh's Jola heritage – entailing a spiritual connection with nature – endowed him with the spiritual know-how to find herbal remedies for diseases (CM1). Many that expressed criticism of this plan faced harassment, abuse, and were often forced into exile (Cassidy and Leach, 2009).

Manipulating Supernatural and Spiritual Powers

Discussions in the field suggest that Jammeh was known to sponsor and participate in Futampaf, the Jola indigenous and cultural rite of passage, which sees boys become men. During this time, a secret initiation takes place, where boys learn about their customs, including how to wield supernatural powers, passed down through generations of Jola men (CM2). Jammeh's public participation in these rites fed into public perceptions and beliefs of his supernatural spiritual powers. He was also known to wear spiritual charms (referred to below as "juju") for protection (Nyanzi, 2013). According to discussions with community leaders, one of the things learned during these rites is the ability to be physically unharmed by weapons. One respondent offered,

I take juju for protection. I learned how to take roots from a tree and grind it. When I apply it to my body or eat it, no knife can ever penetrate my body. Even when I went to the hospital, the injection could not enter my skin (CM2).

From personal observations, in cultural showcases, it is not uncommon to see Jola men piercing their own flesh with knives with no consequence. This idea of being

indestructible also reinforced the narrative of Jammeh being empowered by magic. However, it is important to note that according to community leaders and members, supernatural spiritual powers as realised within Jola traditional spiritualism are not witchcraft or black magic. Rather,

It is more like medicine. Using plants and resources from the earth. Marabouts (spirit doctors) can offer protection but they will work with good spirits, angels from Allah. They even use Quranic verses. The witchcraft is different. That is dark magic (CM2).

Madge (1998) also highlights supernatural interventions among Jolas that are noted for their healing properties. However, the two are often conflated due to superstition and lack of understanding held by many across different ethnic groups. Jammeh has even gone on record to distance himself from sorcery, rejecting any claims that his powers come from witchcraft (Tharoor, 2015). The witch hunts in The Gambia were prompted by Jammeh's belief that witchcraft caused the death of one of his relatives. Collaborating with witch hunters from neighbouring countries, Jammeh ordered kidnappings, torture, and the dispensation of truth potions (Nyanzi, 2013). One respondent offered,

In the early morning, my family would hide in the deep bush. When I would come on the weekends, I did not see my family. My father would stay in the house to sacrifice himself for the family. He said he was ready to die. I would not see my mother. I would question why this would happen in my own community.... This is why I said no to Jammeh (CS3).

Though it is believed by many that Jammeh personally conducted these witch trials to get revenge for his relative, it is also believed by civil society groups that he staged such antics to justify his political claim as being a defender of Islam, which condemns the use of magic (CS2).

Defender of Islam and Holy Appearances

By the time that Jammeh left the country in 2016, he had significantly developed The Gambia's military. With no foreign threats to the country, this strategy is described as an effort to amplify and protect his regime (Dwyer, 2023). In flexing his militarised strength, Jammeh claimed fake honours, such as "Admiral of Nebraska," and the "President Obama Platinum Award," to glorify and elevate his status (Nyanzi, 2013). Being perceived as a defender fuelled the godly appearance that Jammeh tried to propagate. In Islam and Christianity, God is often characterised as being a strong ruler with a multitude of soldiers (Quran 48:4, TNQ, 2023; Revelation: 19:14, NIV, 2023). In building up armed forces, Jammeh was seemingly trying to manipulate the symbolism of the militarised strength of God and position himself as a defender of religious values. Furthermore, Jammeh insisted on being referred to as "Sheikh," which is reserved for qualified Islamic scholars and "nasiru-deen," meaning, "Defender of Religion in Islam" (TRRC Final Report Volumes 1–16, no. 5, 2021: 1).

To lay claim to this title, Jammeh harnessed religious symbolic contrasts. The exploitation of religious symbolic contrasts is a tactic used in the political sphere to shape public sentiment. In the 1970s, the Mouride Brotherhood in Senegal used the religious symbolism of Satan in criticising the government to shape public opinion regarding economic disparities. By invoking the image of Satan, they effectively appealed to the grievances of peasants, connecting with the citizens, who began to see themselves in contrast to the government and more aligned with the brotherhood (O'Brien, 2003). Thus, in 2008, Jammeh referred to homosexuality as "satanic" and "anti-god" (Tharoor, 2015). This was to strategically perpetuate contrasts between The Gambia's religious values and Western values. He deemed homosexuality immoral, sinful, and intolerable in 2008 and proclaimed The Gambia to be a Muslim country in 2015 (Nyanzi, 2013). Taking a strong stance against the LGBTIQA community was a way for Jammeh to strategically assert The Gambia as a genuine Muslim country, not just a "secular" country where Islam is the predominant religion. Jammeh constructed an ideology to bring people together around shared values and vision to overcome conflict and form alliances (Watt, 1966), which hinged on his role as the protector of Islam and Gambian values. In making this strategic distinction that positioned The Gambia as a genuine Muslim country; Jammeh was securing a type of legitimacy that could engender favour among other Islamic states that could offer protection, solidarity, and economic security (Saine 2000 cited in Nyanzi, 2013).

In 2015, Jammeh's declaration of The Gambia as an Islamic Republic gave rise to two distinct narratives regarding his perceived religious devotion and his consolidation of power. Within communities, some interpreted this declaration as a public expression of faith, representing his commitment to a higher religious and moral code. Watt (1966) suggests that autocratic leaders are able to thrive when they appeal to the morality of the nation. As many Gambians strive to be within the will of God, positioning the country as an Islamic republic, for some meant being in closer alignment with God. However, for many, it was seen as a display of power that raised concerns about increased authoritarianism, security threats, and potential limitations on freedoms (CS3, PA2). Given the political instability and terrorism associated with religious conflicts in neighbouring countries, these concerns were further heightened (Odeh, 2021). Jammeh's 2015 decision was deemed unconstitutional (Hultin et al., 2017). Acting outside of the constitution reinforced a perception of Jammeh's uncheckable power. Civil society and political leaders often point to a famous interview given by Jammeh in 2013, where he states that he would rule The Gambia for one billion years if Allah mandated it (Hartmann, 2017).

Conclusion – Reconciling Religion and Transition

The Gambia is still semi-autocratic. Some of the same people during Jammeh's regime are still in office, despite him not being in power.... Democracy is a work in progress. The rule of law is weak. We still see human rights violations but the general public are starting to learn their rights, speak up, and hold government accountable (PA2).

Jammeh lost the 2016 elections. When he initially conceded to Barrow (Hartmann, 2017), in his concession call, Jammeh stated, "...I have no reason to contest the will of the Almighty Allah... this is the will of Allah and as a Muslim I accept it in good faith..." (Alfa Shaban, 2016). Jammeh later retracted his concession to Barrow, citing voting irregularities and distrust in the elections commission (Hartmann, 2017). By casting doubt on the election's credibility, religious ideals of truth and justice were used to support Jammeh's reversal.

The road to democracy in The Gambia is fraught with many challenges. As the findings convey, the religious, spiritual, and cultural values and systems both rejected and reinforced a culture of silence and broader autocratic developments. While some may question if the culture of silence was an indication of complicity, fear, self-preservation, ignorance, or deference to perceived holy mandates, this article asserts that the construction of silence was dynamic and could reflect an interplay of varying motivations. Thus, the complexity of realising a democracy today is situated in a nation's collective struggle to voice and reconcile the gravity of the events that unfolded in The Gambia.

Respondents suggested that though many could feel the fear that undergird their day-to-day lives, prior to the TRRC process, many were not fully aware of the extent of Jammeh's dominance or abuse of their religiosity. One respondent stated, "we didn't know all of these things were going on.... I wonder where Gambians learned this type of violence. I didn't realise it had even reached our little girls" (CS1). For decades, the culture of silence insulated Gambians from harsh realities that they are now having to grapple with. The country is now confirming the whispers and rumours that floated in the shadows of things left unsaid. For many, reconciling the events of the past has forced them to confront their families, neighbours, and friends, who were named in the reports as perpetrators of heinous crimes. Furthermore, many are contending with their own conscious and subconscious participation in the autocracy. For some, the realisation of benefitting from the autocracy has contributed to a form of collective shame/guilt (CS2).

In the spirit of democracy, Gambians are encouraged to seek justice, but many fear the repercussions of speaking out. Trust and change are hindered by the influence of Jammeh, even in exile, and the presence of his conspirators in positions of power (PA2). The TRRC report recommendations face challenges in their implementation, particularly due to insufficient funds for reparations. These challenges impede the pursuit of justice and reconciliation in The Gambia (Darboe, 2022a, 2022b).

For Gambians, the deep-seated ties to religion may have contributed to their shared repression, but it has also been a restorative force in the fight for fundamental freedoms and reconciliation process to date. While many are still hopeful for justice in The Gambia, some are not so keen to see the imprisonment of their relatives, who are often providers and protectors. As a small country, many share relations through blood and/or marriage (CS2). Therefore, clinging to their religious identities, the findings suggest that many Gambians believe that "forgiveness may be the best way forward" (PA1). The Gambia's democratic journey, fuelled by religious consciousness and moral imperatives, like truth and forgiveness, are now shaping the democratic values and narratives in the

country, and are inspiring a shift in what it means to achieve broader democratic principles, like reconciliation and justice. While the victim community still advocates for accountability and justice, many citizens and government officials believe that to move forward as a nation, Gambians must hold on to the tenets of their religious faith, where forgiveness is transformative (PA1).

Examining Jammeh's autocratic rule in relation to the religiosity of Gambians sheds light on the country's political developments. This study provided a nuanced understanding of the past and current political landscape by exploring the relationship between Jammeh's autocracy and the cultural and value systems of the Gambian people. It also addressed the challenges in transitioning from an autocratic regime to a democracy. The findings of this study emphasise the broader cultural and societal contexts in understanding the complexities of power dynamics in The Gambia. By examining the intersection of religion, cultural values, and ethnic dimensions, this research provides a nuanced understanding of autocratic rule and the ongoing transition to democracy. Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by offering insights into the intricate relationship between religion, power, and politics in The Gambia. It underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural context and the role of religion in shaping political developments. By embracing this multidimensional approach, we can pave the way for a more inclusive and democratic society in The Gambia.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to ownership of data by a third party, namely Universiti Malaya. The data were collected in fulfilment of a Ph.D. degree, which is still in development. The data that support the findings of this study are available from Universiti Malaya but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for the current study, and so are not publicly available. Data are, however, available from the authors upon reasonable request and with permission of Universiti Malaya.

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Göttliche Mandate und politische Realitäten: Erforschung von Macht, Religion und Wechsel in Gambia

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel analysiert die Rolle religiöser Symbolik und Religiosität während der Autokratie (1994–2017) und des demokratischen Übergangs (2017–2023) in Gambia. Der ehemalige autokratische Herrscher Yahya Jammeh nutzte die religiöse Symbolik, um seine Autorität zu legitimieren, was zu Razzien, außergerichtlichen Bestrafungen und politischer Unterdrückung führte. Auf der Grundlage von 61 Interviews mit Mitgliedern der Zivilgesellschaft, politischen Akteuren, Interessenvertretern sowie Mädchen in ländlichen und städtischen Gebieten an der Westküste Gambias, zeigen die Ergebnisse den Einfluss kultureller und wertebezogener Systeme, insbesondere die Überschneidung von Religion und Politik, auf die Gestaltung der Autokratie des Landes. Durch die Erforschung einiger Nuancen der religiösen Ideologie und der religiösen Symbole in Bezug auf den Staat ermöglicht die politische Geschichte Gambias eine tiefere Untersuchung der Machtdynamik innerhalb des breiteren kulturellen und gesellschaftlichen Kontexts. Durch die Annahme einer mehrdimensionalen Machtperspektive, die Religion, kulturelle Werte und ethnische Dimensionen einbezieht, bietet dieser Artikel neue Perspektiven für die Analyse von Machtstrukturen und Transformationen in unterschiedlichen soziopolitischen Kontexten.

Schlagwörter

Gambia, Religion, Macht, Autokratie, Jammeh