
France and Islam: A Contested Relationship

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September 11th 2001 has marked indelibly our historical memory with the power of a disruptive violence that has raised or rather reinforced a counter-logic of resentment and closure towards the Muslim communities in Europe. Public discourse worldwide had made national security its prime political objective, and transformed the Muslim communities into potential suspects. The fact that African respondents are less and less willing to co-operate with anthropologists is indicative of a different political climate and a heightened sense of uncertainty and fear. Likewise, African Studies in France have declined¹ and so has the French confidence towards Islam.

The 2005 riots in the suburbs of French cities symbolically catalysed the perceived 'evils' facing France, namely migration and Islam, seemingly responsible for changing or indeed disfiguring French notions of citizenship and Republican universalism, based on Rousseau's notion of a social contract of equal individuals before the law. From this perspective, the Muslim community would be guilty of adhering to family and community allegiances, of speaking their own vernacular, of practicing polygyny and of resorting to their own medical practices. French of African descent are thought to be alien to the Republic because their commitment is believed to lay either towards their parents' countries of origin - the Maghreb and West Africa - or their Muslim heritage. They are seen as hybrids and half-citizens.

The tightening of migration laws makes them an ever-increasing illegal labour force, pushed to the margins of the Republic, dwelling in

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the suburbs, visibly cut off from Paris by the *peripherique* (ring road encircling Paris), or in the foyers². The latter, scattered around Paris and in the Île-de-France region, exemplify their plight. The construction of vulnerability, exclusion and difference is tangibly in progress.

The foyers are a central issue for the Republic historically, politically and socially (Noiriel, 1988).

The first ones were provided by the patronage of the industries as facilities for French internal migrants. The foyers called SONACOTRAL (Société Nationale de Construction pour les Travailleurs Algériens, 1955-1970), housing Algerian migrants, soon followed. They were managed by the Ministry of the Interior, which could thus supervise the Algerian migrants. These were the years of the Algerian War of Independence, when the foyers resembled a military base more than they did public housing. Memory of this can still be found, as those foyers are still standing: the rooms are built around a central space, meant to be occupied by a guardian, who had to identify the residents. Directors of this type of foyers were generally ex-combatants, or people with a military career and training.

In time, responding to the changed historical context, they went on to include all workers, not just Algerians, and to be known as “Foyers SONACOTRA”. SONACOTRA would later manage and sponsor the creation of new foyers out of old factories. Associations like AFTAM (Association pour la FORMATION TECHNIQUE de base des Africains et Malgaches, founded in 1962) and SOUNDIATA (Soutien Union Dignité Accueil du Travailleur Africain, founded in 1963) arose as managing associations of the foyers under the Ministry of Cooperation and Education, while their Administrative Council shared its functions with the migrants’ representatives, and it still does. This gives them a less rigid approach, whereby a degree of self-management is endorsed. Following the infamous rebellions of the 1970^{s3} and the ongoing work of social services and associations, the foyers have reached the status of social residence, or *parc social* (Fievet, 1999). Migrants living there are now ‘residents with special status’, in that they have the right to their

² The foyers are housing centres for exclusively male migrants. They are called 'Foyers des Travailleurs Migrants' in French.

³ The Beurs movement of the 1970s meant the uprising of the Parisian banlieues through the organised action of French youths of Algerian origin, claiming civil rights and political recognition. It also involved a great number of Algerian migrants living in the SONACOTRA foyers. The movement is tragically remembered for the fierce oppression of the protesters at the hands of the French gendarmes, which caused hundreds of deaths.

privacy, with which neither the mayor of Paris nor the police can interfere unless criminal activities take place.

Nevertheless, the foyers are still no-go areas for the general public. Non-African people rarely visit the foyers, unless these are social workers, other professionals or anthropologists like me. The foyers in Paris are particularly unsightly, because they are the oldest ones and they have never been restored: many are falling apart and security and health are never guaranteed. Open sewage, no anti-fire measures, no hygiene in the collective kitchen and so on, make one viewing these places think that clearly, how migrants fare in France entangles with political and historical stakes, socially constructing their reality (Cesari, 2005; Frégosi, 2005; Fall, 2005).

Overall, Sub-Saharan migration represents only 12% of inward migration to France. Approximately thirty-seven thousand Malian migrants live legally in France, while another thousand are undocumented migrants, principally in the Paris region (Sargent, 2006). My work has addressed the portion of male migrants who live in the foyers, about 150.000 men housed in 700 foyers, of which 250 are in the Île-de-France region (Lessault et al., 2009). Notwithstanding the small number of people living there in comparison to the wider migrant population, the *foyers* are the gateway to future housing and work for West African migrants, especially when they are illegal. Thus, the foyers are representative of these migrants' strategies in settling in the big city, since they have been hosting different generations of migrants up to now. This is also true for other ethnic groups from the Sahel, organised in the foyers by village of origin - thus resulting in ethnic patterns, in Paris as much as in other towns of France such as Lyon and Marseille⁴.

France is now the second destination after the USA, while Southern Europe countries such as Spain, Italy and Portugal have emerged as alternative destinations. Nonetheless, African migration towards OECD countries is lower⁵ than to the global South, in line with the current international trend⁶ determined by South-South migrations. So, what is really at stake when European countries vow to 'handle migration'?

⁴ The foyers are intended to be gradually transformed into social residences, in order to address the needs of the aging migrant population: <https://annuaire.action-sociale.org/etablissements/readaptation-sociale/foyer-de-travailleurs-migrants-non-transforme-en-residence-sociale-256/rgn-ile-de-france.html>

⁵ 7.2 million Africans were estimated in 2000, of which 3.4 million Sub-Saharan migrants in comparison to the overall stock of flows, both to France and worldwide

⁶ <http://iomgmdac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Global-Migration-Trends-2015-Factsheet.pdf>

France, Islam and the Ex-Colonies

The construction of the Great Mosque of Paris has been an attempt to institutionalize and give unity to the plethora of Muslim actors in France, as well 'as a gesture of gratitude for the Muslim soldiers who died fighting for France in World War I (Laurence et *al.*, 2006, p. 101). The colonial African Federation, the AOF (Afrique Occidentale Française), which comprised contemporary Senegal and Mali, among other countries, provided soldiers who fought alongside the French. This experience was repeated during World War II and in the post-war years in Madagascar, Indochina and Algeria (Echenberg, 1991). Since the traumatic events of independence in the ex-colonies, not only had France to redesign its overseas territories (France d'Outre-mer) but succeeding governments have had to re-contextualize Islam and the Muslim population in France: migration from the ex-colonies had brought and transformed them into a domestic issue.

The French Council of the Muslim Faith, put in place by the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy in 2003, features umbrella federations such as the very conservative MDF (Musulmans de France), ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood, and the FMCF (National Federation of Muslims of France). The Council was instrumental in incorporating Islam into French territorial policy and preventing foreign funding from interfering with Muslim affairs in France. Since then, 'the official discourse has sponsored the goal of an "Islam of France" as opposed to an "Islam in France" (Laurence et *al.*, 2006, p. 138).

Islam appears to be the central issue, since it is drawing on it that French republicanism articulates its discourse in order to integrate or exclude the influx of Muslim migrants on to the French soil. It is the prism through which integration, ethnicity and religion take form in France. In fact, assimilation, community and *communautarisme* are used as substitutes for them, or rather as the French versions of those concepts. In turn, among West African migrants, a discourse connecting the *sans-papiers*, undocumented migrants, to the Senegalese *tirailleurs* and the Malian veterans, shows both a postcolonial legacy and a rhetoric based on traditional ideas of 'trans-generational mutual obligations' (Mann, 2003, p. 377).

Debates about citizenship, migration and the right to the *jus soli* are not new in France as much as the exclusionary policies softening targeting minority groups, with consequent protests and/or social unrest. In recent history, it was in August 1996 that the *sans-papiers*, predominantly

Maliens, occupied the church of Saint-Bernard in the Goutte d'Or⁷ of Paris. They sought refuge after the new legislation denied them the right to renew their visas, even when many of them had had children in France and had worked there legally for years. The strike received huge media coverage and public attention, with French prominent personalities attending the church to give their support and show their disdain toward the new law.

In 2005, riots sparked in the suburbs of Paris and spread to other towns of France, following the death of two French youths of Malian and Tunisian descent who got electrocuted as they fled the police in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois. The riots, even though not specifically part of my scope of analysis, provided the ground for understanding the type of migration/migrants France is willing to accept. Roy (2005) classified the unrest as "a ghetto youth revolt", an uprising from the "destitute neighbourhoods", where an incident with the police had triggered resentment against the Establishment, its racism and discrimination. My respondents too pointed to the inadequacy of reading the phenomenon by using the "grid of Islam" that, as Sageman (2004) remarked, left out its social and economic dimension. In the media, no mention was made of the foyers, which continue to exist in a state of segregation.

French colonial history, migration and Islam often overlap in the way the polity and people's imagination conceive of the so-called second-generation of migrants in France, as if each of those categories could explain in turn the others. Their past is construed through the lens of French colonial history, responsible for attracting migration from the ex-colonies and migrants whose most common feature is their adherence to Islam. They stand for the French realization that migrants are no longer part of the Fordist era, wherein return migration allowed migrants to work for limited periods in French industry to then return home. Since the closure of French borders in 1974, migrants have begun a process of accommodation, settling down by themselves first and with their spouses and children later, under the regulation of the 1986 Pasqua law on family reunions. Although people of Algerian and Western African descent are now the third if not fourth generation born in France, the symbolism of the 'second generation' has nevertheless remained in the French lexicon to indicate a mass of discredited people, living in the *banlieues* and most commonly practising Islam. As Whitol de Wenden (2005) has put it, they

⁷ The Goutte d'Or is part of the Barbès district (eighteenth borough); its social composition is highly mixed due to the presence of Senegalese, Malian and Northern African people. European French people are a minority here.

are understood as the “minorité ethniques à problème” (p. 9), problematic minorities, normally categorised as the ‘Arabs’ or *beurs*, to use the slang term that has increasingly been used since the 1980^s.

Different migration trends have, over time, encountered diverse economic circumstances and, with them, varying attitudes. The discourse about migration has gradually moved from an economic approach to one concerned with questions of national security and with Islam. This shift was certainly precipitated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA and its sequels. Thus, migration from the ex-colonies is no longer, or not simply, a matter of cultural difference, expressed harmoniously or through clashes, according to Huntington’s analysis, but one which emphasises religion and Islam in particular as the Pandora’s Box of our time. While internationally, Islam is associated with extremism and terrorism, in France it is drawn into an oppositional debate, in which Muslims are seen as bearers of religious sectarianism and *communautarisme*, community drift, infringing the Republican value of *laïcité*, secularism. As Geisseur (2005) has argued, the quandary does not resonate with the medieval opposition of “crusaders/jihadists” (p. 69), it rather premises on secular and civic presuppositions that by definition and by law, enforced in 1905, entail the separation of the church and the state, of the private and social realms. It is argued that the Muslims are overstepping this important line, for they are imposing on French society their way of being in the world by proselytizing, dressing differently, practicing polygyny and so on and so forth. In short, they have invaded the social arena with their private beliefs.

Multiculturalism, *Communautarisme* and the Republic

Over at least the past two decades, multiculturalism has become part of the European political agenda concerning the definition of its political/cultural identity, in which Islam can be the grounds for a denial of EU membership for security reasons. Such has been the case of Turkey. While the Constitution of the European Community opened up a process of inclusion and expansion, each country has created its own internal distinctions as to what citizenship should be and to whom it should be granted. The distinction between what is external and internal has blurred in the face of the Muslim communities claiming citizenship and equal rights.

Although the institutionalization of the Muslim faith, and thus the recognition of the Muslim community, occurred in France in 1926 with the foundation of the Great Mosque of Paris, the matter is not solely

legal, but deeply steeped in the social and cultural habits which those institutions represent. Islam, with about five million and a half Muslims⁸, is now the second religion of France, after Catholicism and before Judaism and Buddhism. The Muslim revival and organization began in the 1980s and has been interpreted in various ways. Certainly, the settling of the Muslim migrant population has played an important role, but so has the impact of the Iranian Revolution and of the new Muslim era: November 1980 coincided with the XV century of the Hegira (Diop, 1993). In France, Muslim associations are extremely composite in nature, due to ethnic and inspirational trends, and generally organized under umbrella federations⁹.

Muslim minority groups in France and in Europe have been the object of racism and discrimination, often because they correspond to the out cast proletariat of the great cities (Pace et al., 2018), where they are lumped together and where education, access to services and decent housing are impaired. A policy of positive action has been implemented since the 1980^s in the ZEPs (Zones of Priority Education), that is, the *banlieues*, where pedagogic and social insertion programmes aimed at the “integration” of these groups. Seemingly, the acknowledgment of the existence of social and ethnic groups in France has come through the recognition of their social malaise and thus through their stigmatization. The historical background to this goes back to the 1960^s, when the housing crisis and the baby boom brought about the construction of big built-up areas for cheap housing (Habitation à Loyer Modéré), after Le Corbusier’s popularized model, where young couples settled and started their new life (Whitol de Wenden, *op., cit.*). Migrants from West Africa and second-generation Algerians robustly *ethicised* these areas, making them less appealing to the French middle class: the *français de souche*, as

⁸ Statista 2020: <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/472017/population-religion-france/>

⁹ Diop (2000) describes how “the Union of Islamic Organizations of France, created in 1983”, now called MDF (Musulmans de France), “groups mainly Moroccans and Tunisians; the National Federation of Muslims of France, created in 1985, has as its base Moroccan Muslim workers and businessmen. The Turkish organisation is made up of four sub-groups, ranging from moderate to more radical and of extreme right-wing inspiration (such as the Muslim Union of Cultural Centres of Europe). The Federation of the Muslim Associations of Africa, Comoros and the Antilles, which became a French Federation in 2000, is confined to the Parisian region. The missionary and community-based movement, Tabligh, established in France in 1970, has split into two sub-groups. Moreover, beyond a plethora of Muslim student associations, is finally the phenomenon of Sufi orders, organised ethnically amongst the Turkish and Kurdish (the Naqchibandyya and Betachiyya), African (the Tijianyya, Qadriyya and Mouridyya) and Maghrebien (Tijianyya, Isawiyya and Alawiyya) communities” (pp. 24- 5; my translation from the French text).

they are normally referred to, who gradually started deserting these neighbourhoods, which were now attracting only migrants from the slums and run-down areas of the Metropole. The reconfiguration of the Île-de-France region is thus, a world where the unblemished rigor of class and “race” (Gilroy, 2002) works to make these areas the lost territories of the Republic, as Brenner (2002) famously sketched them.

The emergence of communities *issues de la migration*, born out of migration, has brought about the rethinking of the French national identity, where by Muslim minority groups are guilty of introducing their *communautarisme* through customs and Islam, the one the synonym of the other, defying, as it were, the Republican model, which is liberal, democratic and secular in nature. These fundamentals are constantly asserted with renewed enthusiasm and strength in the face of allegedly unwarranted Muslim claims.

Practice of Islam in the Foyers

The practice of Islam among the Soninké migrants has known different phases, which correspond to the chronology of their accommodation process. During the 1960^s Islam was not frequently practised in the foyers. Much like in the Islamic conception of *dar al-harb*, the land where Islam is absent, as opposed to *dar al-Islam*, the land of Islam, this generation of migrants thought of their stay in France as temporary and where they should not stick roots. Over the 1970^s and 1980^s, mobility to France become more and more prevalent in the community and their permanence in Europe more accepted, so that the community was confronted by the necessity of reformulating Islam transculturally, that is, to find ways to practise it abroad and justify its worshipping in the *kafirs* lands. The Soninkés started to open their *daawa*, inspired in its most rigorist reform movement by the Wahabyya. Their faithful were called *sunnagummu*, as they advocated a return to the “purest” tradition of the Sunna. In the end, the movement could not create an alternative to the essentially political/social organization of the Soninké community in France (Timera, 1996, p. 252).

The first Soninké *daawa* (الدعوة), Sufi order, in France, which gathered a host of worshippers, was founded by Mamadou Diana, from the village of Soninkara, Mali. He studied the Qur’an in France and only after his return from Morocco in 1974, did he start preaching at his *daawa* among his compatriots, spreading his message around the Soninké foyers in Paris, Le Havre and Lille. Timera (ibid) suggests that the growth and success of the *daawa* was intended to provide the Soninké of

France with a motivation to practise Islam; back in the village such a role was fulfilled by the family and the *moodi*, the marabout (spiritual leader), both absent after migration. Qur'an and Arabic classes started taking place in the foyers, enhancing the importance of literates and intellectuals, such as the imams, over the marabouts. Among the Soninkés in France, the Islamic awakening meant a contraposition to the lineage authority in favour of the clerics, in contrast with the latter's secondary role back in the village. Mamadou Diana was later assassinated, his death apparently linked to the project of building a mosque. The role of the *daawa* lost its vigour, so much so that Islam among the Soninkés is now more a matter of personal devotion than a phenomenon organised around a *daawa* (pp. 175-178).

Diop (et al., 1996) informs us that the first mosque in a 'black African residence appeared in 1967, at the ground floor of foyer *La Commanderie*', in the nineteenth borough of Paris. "In 1977, a second foyer" opened its doors to a mosque and "now almost all of them have prayer rooms, which are subsidized by all residents of the foyer, whether Muslim or not. The UNAFO, the principle organization of black African foyers, has 126 foyers in the Île-de-France region of which 119 have prayer rooms" (p. 82).

The Imam at Foyer93

At Foyer93, Friday prayers take place in the court, since the prayer room is very small. The imam is Djibril. He is a man in his sixties, from the village of Gory, Mali. He had come to France in the 1970^s, when the increased Soninké and, more broadly, African migration to France enjoyed few restrictions and more adequate job opportunities. He has now four wives and twelve children who live in the village. As he states, any journey to Gory is an occasion to increase the family: during my fieldwork in Paris, he went back once for the birth of his baby girl.

He has retired, but according to the law, he has to reside at least three months in France in order to obtain his pension, so Djibril returns to Africa at least once a year. The CAF (Centre Allocations Familiales, Family Allowance Centre) carries out regular checks on the effective presence of the retired migrants in France by checking the stamps on their passports. The same procedure is not applied to retired French citizens.

At Foyer93, Djibril lives on the second floor with his family members: two brothers, three cousins and a nephew. His status grants him a privileged position and thus the chance to live with his family and in a quieter area of the foyer, as the rooms in the lower floors are noisier than

those in the upper ones. Nonetheless, given the increasing number of people in the foyers, more and more frequently people pour into his room at night, begging for some space to crash on.

Djibril is a friend of Farid, the owner of the local laundry, a man of Algerian origin in his forties, also a Muslim. They chat about the situation at Foyer93, about their home countries and Islam. Often Djibril spends hours, even after dark, at the laundry. He and Farid keep each other company, since they have consolidated a good friendship. Over time, I got to know Farid better, who told me about Djibril's comfortable life at Foyer93. Due to either decency or shame, Djibril would rarely talk about it with me.

Following his retirement, Djibril spends a lot of time at Foyer93. He can relax in the afternoons, taking advantage of having the room for himself, as his family members have gone to work or simply out. In the mornings, people take turns to clean the floor and even to iron his garments, duties that his wives would have otherwise carried out back home. His landline phone rings constantly as people ask for his services, such as carrying out marriages, ceremonies and mourning rituals according to the Muslim ritual. He has learned the Qur'an at a *madrasa*, a Qur'anic school in the village; he speaks fair French and, most of all, he reads Arabic, which is quite unheard of among the residents.

Djibril is also in charge of the savings for the mosque. Donations are made especially during *zakat* (الزكاة), the annual tithe and one of the five pillars of Islam, which sanctions the obligation to help people in need, and generally the poor. The residents donate their money to him, who, once he has collected a considerable amount, places it into the dedicated account. The residents no longer store the money at Foyer93, since a troubled occurrence left one resident dead after a burglary went wrong. It was suspected that an insider might have leaked the information that money was stored at Foyer93. The imam is the only one who has the code of the account and who can withdraw the money, which sometimes is used as an extra source of revenue when the village savings are insufficient. There are as many savings as the villages represented at Foyer93.

Djibril has little contact with the other residents in the courtyard, although he receives many visits in his room. The residents' delegates are an example. They inform him about the proceedings of the residents' committee and of the problems of Foyer93, which are not few and far between. The way the clerical and lay management of Foyer93 intertwine can be witnessed during these briefings. While the delegates stand for the

practical aspects of Foyer93 and its external dynamics, the imam sanctions them as the main Muslim representative in the foyer. In the face of unsolved disputes among the residents, after the roommates and the delegates have intervened, the imam is the one who is called upon. Islam, for many of the residents, is not a matter of choice, it is something within which they have grown, and a “good” Muslim, beyond respecting the precepts of Islam, is somebody who is “proper” as they put it. On the contrary, a “bad” Muslim is somebody who brings some degree of pollution or disorder, whether symbolic or physical, quite resonant with May Douglas’ conceptualisation of both purity and danger (1966). There is a sense of legitimate/illegitimate behaviour, according to which one knows immediately if a resident follows what is perceived to be the good practice. Spending too much time at the cafeteria or outside the foyer at night, and not praying during the day can be indications of one’s misbehaviour. To incur the residents’ negative opinion bears consequences and nobody wishes to be the object of their judgments, as these will eventually reflect on their family’s reputation too. The village community expands and overlaps with the Diasporic community of Paris, so that there is too much at stake for the residents not to adhere, if not formally, to the rules of Foyer93. In the same way as back in the village it was impossible to go beyond the limits of the community in pursuing one’s life project, so it is in France, only that the boundaries are now also defined by the constraints and hierarchies of Foyer93, by the Parisian municipality and the French national policies on migration.

At Foyer93, the emphasis on Islam testifies to the need for an organizational system able to mobilize and sanction the residents’ behaviour more strongly than the authority of a delegate can. When the residents say that the delegates deal with everything in the foyers, they put two concepts forward. The first is that the delegates are the main people with whom the French authorities deal with regards to the management of the foyer, while the second foregrounds that what goes on internally is community and/or traditionally regulated and that it is for nobody else to interfere with.

Arguably, it is not the practice of Islam that intensifies upon migration, but rather the community bond, which is made through it. The residents perform the ablutions, carry out the ritual prayer and mingle together afterwards. The new groups, those who do not have an allocated bed, take advantage of the common areas in which they can stay as long as possible, before they can eventually lay their mattresses for the night. The imam’s and the elders’ moral reproach of those who spend a lot of time in the cafeteria also aims at targeting the new residents (generally

younger), and at alienating them. The residents adopt strategies of inclusion and exclusion in order to integrate or marginalise categories of residents whom they perceive as a threat. Such a threat is predicated through the vocabulary of Islam. Those who have newly arrived are alien to the existing community and only the test of time spent at Foyer93 will prove their true colours.

The Marabout

In the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan countries, the notion of marabout or *cheick* is used to identify the spiritual leader, often at the head of a *zawiya* (الزاوية), sacred pilgrimage centre, or the initiator of a Sufi order, whose teaching he is bound to perpetuate as a *muqaddam* (مُقَدِّم). The marabout - French adaptation of the Arabic term *murabit* (المرابط), their followers and the phenomenon of Sufi Islam with their orders, the *tariqa* (الطريقة), are common knowledge in France. The marabout is the unique master of his *talibés* (طالبان), followers, who resort to his spiritual knowledge to be guided in both their ordinary and devout life. Marabouts are part of a caste system that is passed on through generations, in which the clerics enjoy the highest status, followed by the iron makers and the *griots*, bards who are repositories of the oral tradition.

The West African cultural landscape is dotted with figures such as the traditional healers, who are reputed for being in connection with the supernatural realm thanks to their *baraka* (البركة), God-given gift, that allows them to deal with the *jinns*, the spirits. The latter are part of a religioscape within which health and wellbeing are understood and managed, at its core is the notion that the *jinns* (جن) control illnesses (Last, 2007). Healers are thought to disclose the cause of illnesses and tackle their effects in nature (Sow, 1980), while the marabout is conceived to link the immediate reality of suffering to Allah (الله), to Whom he addresses his prayers. In fact, different forms of intelligence outline an Islamic cosmogony whose signs, *ayat* (آيات), inform humankind of its divine nature. This realisation, *tahaqouq* (التحقق), is the primal step into Islam, which is 'submission' to this truth, and thus the first obligation of a Muslim.

According to my respondents, the ontological complexity of *baraka* adds to the confusion among Europeans in identifying a marabout as opposed to a healer or one who practises magic, *sahar* (سحر), all equally levelled down to charlatans. *Barkat* (بركات) is only one term among several, that specifically refers to a particular form of saintly power, which is not only for healing and exorcism. In this sense, “it is a generic Islamic term for divine blessing” (Werbner 2003, p. 250). Islam in Mali had been introduced by Cheick Ahmed Hamallah (1883-1943), the founder of the eponymous Sufi brotherhood, the Hammallyya, a schismatic branch of the principal Tijanyya order that split over the controversy of the so-called “eleven grains”¹⁰ (Traoré, 1983). When I enquired about the figure of Cheick Hamallah at Foyer93, my respondents admitted that there still are a few affiliates in the region of Kayes. However, the Hammallyya has developed into a marginal phenomenon in Mali, while the marabout has lost his role as spiritual guide, becoming instead the dispenser of the Qur’anic teaching. At Foyer93, this function is granted by the imam, who has thus come to the forefront as the Soninké’s Muslim representative in the Diaspora (as seen above).

In the Soninké society, the *modinu*, marabouts, belonged to the lowest rank of the freemen, the *hooro*, in the rulers’ entourage after princes, advisors and warriors. As studied by Jamous (1981), they were set apart from the rivalries of the segmented society, ravaged by the fights of the different groups for power over the land, and lived in their own compound. The marabout marked the moment of ceasefire, in which the fighting groups settled their blood debts of vengeance, before internal wars were triggered again by more killings and raids.

The marabout I could meet at Foyer93, Ahmed, like many others throughout Paris, practises divination rituals and attends to people from the most disparate backgrounds, beyond the residents themselves. He is

¹⁰ The Hammallists claimed that the recitation of the Tijan formula *Jawaharatu-l-Kamali* (جوهرة الكمال), The Jewel of Perfection, be eleven times in the *wazifa* (ورقة), praising prayer, as posited in the main Tijan book, *Jawahir al-Ma’ani* (جواهر المعاني), The Jewels of Meaning, rather than twelve, as several Tijan branches, aligned with the French, did. Also, the Hammallist’s prayer was composed of two rather than four *rakas* (راكاس), prostrations, indicative of a prayer carried out quickly because of danger. During the French colonial occupation, the so called ‘short prayer’ symbolised the Muslim revolt against the persecuting French.

from Diafouné and he is in his late fifties. He admitted having his own method, which he describes as a path. In his words:

“I can find answers by following my own path. It’s like a route, which is not for everybody to know. All I have is my way and this prayer-bead. You see? I don’t need anything else.”

Ahmed is renowned for his ability both to understand his postulants’ situation and find a solution accordingly. His clients are expected to carry out a *sadaqah* (صدقة), donation, and when they are Muslim, they are also required to pray the *Al-Fatihah* (الفاتحة), the first Sura of the Qur’an, and an extra *duha* (دوحة), praising prayers to God. One day, a woman in her forties, Ivorian, was in front of the imam’s room, carrying two pints of milk. The door was sealed off with sellotape, since the room had been sprayed with pesticides. I had a meeting with the imam myself, so there we were, one in front of each other. She said that she would have preferred to make her donation to the imam himself, but in fact *sadaqah* can be offered to anyone. So, the first resident who approached us was given the two pints of milk. I then escorted the lady out and asked her what she had found with the marabout’s help; in short, why she visited him. She responded:

“That marabout is very good. He can “see” many things. He has helped me a lot; he has given me advice on many things. But you, young lady [referring to me], be careful! Don’t hang about too much in here [Foyer93], or you’ll end up married to one of them before you know [laughter]!”

Kuczynski (2002, 2004) has extensively studied French religious pluralism. In particular, her case study of a French woman attending African marabouts to get her lover back (Kuczynski, 1988) provides an insight on the expectations of the French people when they visit the marabout at Foyer93. The author presents a woman who thinks that the marabout can ‘magically’ change her destiny. By giving money to him, “analogous, for her, to paying a psychoanalyst” (p. 223), she expects results and if these do not follow, then ‘the marabout has done nothing’ (*ibid*). Often the western client teleexoticizes traditional healing because

of or together with the “otherness” of their practitioners, putting the label “magic” on it.

In the African milieus, attending a marabout is nothing exceptional, but rather part of a behaviour that is embedded in the community. Generally, the marabout is somebody of one’s own entourage, if not ethnic group and religious affiliation. Within the Mouride¹¹ community for example, practising marabouts are Mouride themselves. The residents view the marabout as a savant, whose experience and spirituality enable him to see the *jinns*. He is considered to be a pure man, who can only do “good things” for the people, but certainly not change the course of their life. This would imply “black magic”. Sorcerers’ witchcraft can probably be summed up by the work of Evans-Pritchard (1937), in that it implies vengeance and the intention to harm somebody. The phenomenon not only is forbidden in Islam, it is also not condoned by the community, Soninké and Muslim by and large. Hence, their definition of charlatans: those who claim being able to solve all problems or that have no knowledge to back their practice, which they nevertheless fake for the “Europeans”, who are thought to believe everything.

When Sambaké, one of the residents, attends the marabout, it is to ask advice and guidance in moments of distress and crisis. To thank the marabout Sambaké pays him money. Among the residents, the money exchange is not a way of obtaining the marabout’s best intervention, as it would be among the French audience, but rather a matter of expressing the value of the donee for the community. In the village, *sadaqah* may entail the gift of food, artifacts and fabric. It is upon migration that money has become the common currency to express gratitude, especially considering the cost of life in France, so that it has acquired, in turn, social value. Even though the gift of money should be optional and according to the means of the person, to give too little, even amongst the residents, is shameful. Verses of the Qur’an are used during consultation and repeated over the postulant, because “the Qur’an itself is a healing”, as stated in the Qur’an, (17: 82 and 41: 44). The marabout may also produce protective amulets with words of the Qur’an written in it and ask his client to do something with it or to undertake an action that might be propitiatory to a good outcome, such as a *sadaqah*.

The residents are much more disenchanted about this than other people who do not belong to the community, to the point of admitting that trustworthy marabouts would have not migrated and that those who

¹¹ The Mouridiyya is a Sufi branch of Islam, founded in Senegal by Cheick Amadou Bamba M’Backé (1855- 1927). The order counts an increasing number of followers from all over the world, both among Muslims and new converts.

have left their country young might not have learnt enough to acquire the “secret” from the forefathers. The marabouts’ personal history makes for their credibility and therefore their reputation within the community, both back home and in the Diaspora.

Renowned marabouts are old enough to have practised divination rituals for a time and/or combined this with the characteristic apprenticeship they may have inherited from the family, or through journeys in West Africa, which they carry out to satisfy their spiritual quest. Practising marabouts mediate between this world and the beyond, in a fusion of the worlds akin to that described by Stoller (1989), where the metaphysical reality that they summonis the pantheon of the spirits, doubles of the people to whom they manifest. For the residents, the relationship with the invisible world is one of dialogue and not of possession. The ‘tricks’ that the *jinn*s may play on people - because the latter have deceived them, walked on their territory or stepped inadvertently on them, may cause diseases that are construed as an attack. Episodes of this sort, require healing that not all marabouts are able to perform.

Conclusion

People at Foyer93 live in a limbo, fundamentally trapped at the margins of society, with little hope or desire of escaping it, since moving out of the foyer would entail the end of the community, its internal network of aid and support, and thus the end of their migratory project. In this context, tradition and Islam intervene to sanction dynamics already existing or chosen by the residents in order to make their internal organization work. Traditional hierarchies are both endorsed and reconfigured in the Diaspora, where by exclusionary policies make the Soninké community survive, rather than integrate, as state interventionism implies stricter rules and further marginalization form the migrant communities living in France. Likewise, people of migrant descent are considered second-class citizens, as their loyalty is always questioned based on their supposed allegiance to their parent’s country of origin or to Islam. Certainly, the grating question of whether Muslims will ever be fully-fledged citizens and welcome migrants is always obliterated under the banner of the French Republicanism, which frames the Muslim communities as impossible to integrate - for their *communautarisme*, polygyny and so on, echoing old colonial biases towards Islam and the Muslim community.

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