

# World Christianity, Urbanization, and Identity

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World Christianity and Public Religion Series, Vol. 3

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AND IDENTITY

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THE WORLD CHRISTIANITY AND PUBLIC  
RELIGION SERIES

During the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars began to pay closer attention to the polycentric and culturally diverse nature of Christianity worldwide. In particular, the rapid growth in the number of Christians living in the Global South caught the attention of Western scholars as a trend that would not be reversed in the near future.

A number of books have been written in the attempt to offer clues on how these drastic demographic changes affect the shape of World Christianity in the coming decades. Beyond the fascination with the exciting numbers, one might notice that the rapid Christian growth in the Global South and its diasporas have generated a new-world Christian consciousness that brings along profound cultural, social, and economic consequences, which demand further scholarly attention. World Christianity scholarship has demonstrated in the past few decades that Christianity can no longer be conceived as a Western religion. We have stepped into the threshold of a new era. New and creative theological insights have emerged, debunking any hegemonic understanding of World Christianity. Conversion to Christianity, especially in former Western colonies, can no longer be conceived as the result of the Westernization of converts. Instead, indigenous cultures and spiritualities that at some point were expected to disappear remain alive and strong. In fact, greater attention to the revitalization of indigenous traditions since the end of the twentieth century has informed new understandings of Christianity, particularly in non-Western contexts.

This series engages a number of the emerging voices from within a variety of indigenous Christianities around the world, paying attention not only to their histories and practices, but also to emerging theological articulations and their impact on the public sphere. While during the modern era the study of Christianity tended to be predominantly informed by Western perspectives and priorities, World Christianity in the beginning of the twenty-first century is better understood in the context of contextual

## CONTESTED SPACES: DIOLA CHRISTIANITY IN RURAL AND URBAN SÉNÉGAL

Aliou Cissé Niang

"Is it still possible to call ourselves Christians without renouncing our deepest African existence at home?"<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

As a Senegalese Diola biblical scholar and follower of Jesus Christ, I have come to appreciate the power of religious innovation. Tracing the movement of Jesus from the first century Palestine to the Graeco-Roman world to the late second century reveals how inculturated the messages of Jesus and the Apostle Paul were.<sup>2</sup> If inculturation is entrenched in the Christian DNA, why did some of the French colonial missionaries of the order of the Holy Ghost Fathers fail to reckon with this incontrovertible reality given the fact that the version of Jesus's message they sought to spread was significantly shaped by their sociocultural optic? Diola Christianity in Senegal, West Africa, is one of the most fascinating examples of the rise and steady growth of a foreign religion in Senegal, especially among Diola people. The seed planted by missionaries, the Holy Ghost Fathers, and the French colonial policies introduced in the Casamance region of Senegal profoundly affected Diola rural life.

Christianity, introduced by Catholic missionaries belonging to the Congregation of the Holy Ghost Father, and colonialism exerted much

<sup>1</sup> "Est-il encore possible, chez nous, de se dire chrétiens sans renier son être profond d'Africain?" Nazaire N. Diatta, "Et si Jésus-Christ, Premier-né d'entre les morts, était l'initié?: La personnalité de l'initié joola face au Christ," *Téléma* 57, no. 1 (1989): 50.

<sup>2</sup> Graydon S. Snyder, *The Inculturation of the Message of Jesus on Jewish and Roman Cultures* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 1-53.



influence on Diola culture. Paulo Palmeri, Constan Vanden Berghen, and Adrien Manga offer unique insights into the life and thought of the Diola of Mof Avvi. The magnitude of their impact was documented by colonial administrators, some missionaries, and ethnographers (foreign and later local).<sup>3</sup> The work of Robert M. Baum offers a good chronological study on the emergence of a Diola Christianity in the Essulalu townships. Gradually, Christianity spread throughout the region being facilitated by subsequent missionary leaders and mostly local converts.<sup>4</sup> Baum's publications provide corrective insights to earlier ethnographic contributions that were conditioned by colonial geopolitical discourse and ideology.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, I will discuss two main developments in Diola villages: First, Diola encounter with missionaries and the economic policies introduced by French colonial officials that gave rise to increasing seasonal migration from rural to urban contexts such as Ziguinchor and especially Dakar; and second, the gradual contextualization of missionary Christianity with traditional elements of Diola religion that shaped a formidable Diola Christianity. To sustain the weight of my claim, I will offer some thoughts on the sociology of knowledge, Diola Traditional Religion, Diola Christianity, and seasonal migration.

### Embodied participation as method

For many years, I tried to understand the constructed image of Africans, not Africa as a continent. I make this distinction based on my research into this troubling matter and my observations on how the continent and its peoples are described by some Western writers and now covered by media outlets. During the transatlantic slave trade, Africa was coveted by

Europeans for her black people who were objectified as movable property<sup>6</sup> and with the colonial advent, an equally pernicious relationship developed to further wrest the wealth of the continent from her people. Africa is being loved not for her people as human beings, but for the economic resources she offers—precious stones, minerals, oil, animals, timber wood, and the like. Why wasn't she loved for her people, their culture and religious practices? Observations made by Peter Mark provide a chilling answer. He writes,

English and French attitudes toward Africans in the Senegambia developed and became well-defined during the late sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth century. These attitudes were influenced by three main factors: European ethno-centrism, the commercial relations which governed European-African intercourse, and the growth of the slave trade. During this period, Europeans expressed increasingly negative characterizations of Africans and their way of life. An ideology of African inferiority served, in part, to validate the Atlantic slave trade. It was easier to justify the enslavement of people who were considered less civilized or even a lower form of humanity. The formation of this ideology was facilitated by ethnocentric perceptions which led to a bias in favor of more Westernized peoples. One important parameter by which Senegambians came to be judged inferior to their European counterparts was in the area of religious beliefs and practices.<sup>7</sup>

African Traditional Religion has been overlooked and sadly misunderstood before and during the colonial period. How Africans practiced their faith traditions was grossly mischaracterized as polytheistic and barbarous superstition. The transfer of culture, Christian beliefs, and practices from civilized Europeans to the uncivilized peoples of the world presupposed that colonists have little, if nothing, to learn from the colonized. Also, methodologically, French and British ethnographers approached Africans, and in particular Senegalese people, differently, especially when exploring the African religious tapestry. Earlier studies inspired by traditional approach tended to trust their direct observation on which they constructed their views of African practices and beliefs. Jan Vansina's

<sup>3</sup> Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Les Diola: Essai d'analyse fonctionnelle sur une population de Basse-Casamance* (Tome 1&2; Dakar, SN: Imprimerie Protat FrPres, Mâcon, 1959); Jean Girard, *Genèse du pouvoir charismatique en basse Casamance (Sénégal)* (Dakar, SN: IFAN, 1969); Christian Roche, *Histoire de La Casamance: Conquête et résistance: 1850-1920* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Constan Vanden Berghen et Adrien Manga, *Une introduction à un voyage en Casamance: Enampor, un village de riziculteurs en Casamance, au Sénégal* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Robert M. Baum, "Emergence of Diola Christianity," *Africa* 60, no. 3 (1990): 371-398. See also, Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4, 6, 8, 10, 24, 34, 36-37, 39, 42, 83, 130, 134-5, 143-5, 148, 150, 153 (on Christianity), and 25, 31-32, 146, 154 (peanuts as cash crop).

<sup>6</sup> Louis Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir ou le calvaire de Canaan* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987), 172 code 44. For a detailed discussion of biblical rationale for slavery and attitudes against people of African descent, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) and Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Mark, "'Marybuckes' and the Christian Norm: European Images of Senegambians and Their Religions, 1550-1760," *African Studies Review* 23, no. 2 (1980): 91.



critique of the shortcomings of the much-hailed Western ethnographic direct field research substantiates my argument with this chilling story.

The old man stood there in his compound on the top of the hill, silent now, lost in dreams, and gazing over the landscape. He had just retold us how the colonial soldiers came to capture the town and his freedom. He stood there for a long while, recalling perhaps all that happened to him and those he had known since then until this day in the waning years of the era these men had ushered in. If so, his vision of colonial history had certainly very little in common with the standard accounts one finds in textbooks about the period.<sup>8</sup>

What Africans might say about their socioreligious and cultural world is readily suspected as untrustworthy and subjective. Such a distrust has now been challenged by experts such as Vansina and Baum who see some indispensable value in what native people said about their life and thought. Robert M. Baum writes,

The final source of information from field research grows out of participant observation. By living in a community and joining in religious, work, and social activities, the researcher acquires a wealth of information about the relationships among religious thought, historical consciousness, and daily life. A religion is something that is lived, as well as practiced. . . I had to experience it. . . To understand his shrine, I had to perform its ritual.<sup>9</sup>

Insights from local informants is invaluable as many ethnographers have now come to realize that they have access to the kind of information most local people hold sacred and therefore taboo to be divulged to any foreign experts. My point is, nuanced accounts on Diola identity, socioreligious, cultural, and economic realities inspired by their lived experiences should include informant accounts.<sup>10</sup> It is now commonplace to encounter words such as “concealing”<sup>11</sup> and “secrecy”<sup>12</sup> in recent publications presuming some access to information that can be only be gained from informant participatory agency. Most cultures conceal and hold

<sup>8</sup> Jan Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Baum, *Shrines*, 17, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Diédhiou, *L'identité Joola en question (Casamance)* (Paris: Karthala, 2011). See also, Boubacar Barry, *Le sénégal du XVe au XIXe siècle : Traité négrière, Islam conquête coloniale* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2017), 384–89.

<sup>11</sup> Robert M. Baum, “Concealing Authority: Diola Priests and Other Leaders in the French Search for a Suitable Chefferie in Colonial Senegal,” *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 16, no. 17 (2011): 35–51.

<sup>12</sup> Ferdinand de Jong, *Masquerades of Modernity: Power and Secrecy in the Casamance, Senegal* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 3–22, 128–151, 185–94.

secret some features of their cultural memory. Even progressive societies aspiring to much transparency do not share all the elements of their cultural memory—some treasured cultural elements often remain concealed from outsiders and foreigners. What I am saying is this, to access cultural taboos one may have to infiltrate the cultural memory with the help of native informants. It is also true that not all informants would readily divulge the most sacred beliefs of their societies. To gain insight into the lived experiences of Diola people, one must live and eat with them. Even then, a foreigner will always need the help of informants whose account of local beliefs hinges on their memory of the orally transmitted beliefs. The use of informants or interviews with natives is another form of accessing practical dimensions of “Diola customs”—performed life and thought of Diola people. Though better than just direct observation, a more fully embodied way of accessing Diola customs, Baum understands the Diola expression, “what we do,” as meaning the researcher must live with the people and engage in their daily activities; namely, one must “see,” “experience,” and “perform” Diola rituals.<sup>13</sup> The combination of direct field observations, interviews, and the ritually performed life is what I call *embodied participatory inquiry* that feeds and shapes adequate theory and method.

The need for this method lies in the fact that Diola people, like many sub-Saharan groups of people, are not objects, but humans with pre-colonial robust cultural memory transmitted orally—a process that “seldom included its abstract quantification” since oral traditions were “designed to develop and transmit those aspects of the past which were deemed important, and absolute dating was never, nor could it ever be, one of these.”<sup>14</sup> In this *imaginaire*, “oral traditions are concerned with identifying historical events that are roughly contemporaneous and with establishing sequence of events”<sup>15</sup> and the purpose has never been based on the exact dating. The importance of relative chronology in this case, “reveals the relative seniority of social groups; legal, social, and economic rights; and ritual precedence that structure contemporary human activity.”<sup>16</sup> Although armchair scholarship has its place in academic inquiry, to adequately understand and write about Diola life and thought or other cultural practices, an *embodied participatory inquiry* is indispensable.

<sup>13</sup> Baum, *Shrines*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> David Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 1–2.

<sup>15</sup> Henige, *Chronology*, 1–2.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Feierman, *Shambaa Kingdom* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 4.



Theories about pre-colonial Diola origins and settlement in the Casamance region where they now dwell, in the southwestern region bordering the Atlantic Ocean, is the subject of much debate among Diola ethnographers and anthropologists.<sup>17</sup> Insights from some experts shed much light on how one might make sense of internal movements of African people. Constructions of Diola origins are important, but do not really matter given the diverse unity shared by West Africans of which authors such as Cheikh Anta Diop and Mamadou Fall masterfully speak. The evidence produced thus far shows that Diola people, among other Senegalese groups, emerged from the West African geographical location.<sup>18</sup> In spite of the fact that there was a cohesion between West African groups of people, there were intergroup skirmishes over land as was common to humanity since time immemorial, especially between the Diola and the Bainunk that lasted for many years.<sup>19</sup>

This essay does not revisit these theories of Diola origins; instead, it addresses Diola religious thought and life, Diola encounter with Christianity during and after the colonial period and how colonization influenced Diola migration. To avoid common mistakes some sociologists and anthropologists made in lumping Diola people into a homogenous group, this essay focuses on the Diola of the southern ridge of the Casamance River, especially the Brin-Séléki and in particular the Enampor and Séléki townships and their Essulalu neighbors.

Dwellers of Enampor and Séléki are monotheists. Their supreme deity is *Émit* (God) or *Ala Émit* (the one who owns the heavens). This is the only deity Diola people revere, but they also believe there are good and malevolent spirits in God's creation. In no way does a Diola of Enampor or Séléki confuse God with these spirits (good or evil) or shrines, visual representations (masks and sculptures), or particular trees as commonly believed. The Diola are faithful to *Ala Émit* and conceive of themselves as a *corporate participatory agent* of the deity as they strive to live

<sup>17</sup> Thomas, *Les Diola*; Philippe Mèguelle, *Chefferie coloniale et Égalitarisme Diola: Les difficultés de la politique indigène de la France en Basse-Casamance (Sénégal), 1828–1923* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012); Roche, *Histoire de La Casamance*; Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade*.

<sup>18</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1959); Anta Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa*, trans. Harold J. Salemson (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987); Mamadou Fall, *Les territoires de la Sénégambie entre l'épée et le croissant: X<sup>e</sup>me – XX<sup>e</sup>me Siècles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Sennen Andriamirado, "La guerre de sept cents ans," *Jeune Afrique* 29, no. 1687 (April/May 1993): 26–30.

sympiotically with the deity's creation—a life meticulously ritualized around rice farming.<sup>20</sup>

As such, Diola life and thought is an expression of African Traditional Religion.<sup>21</sup> The Diola experience the deity as an invisible being who is transcendent as well as immanent—deeply involved in their daily needs, as healer and sustainer of life with abundant rain for rice farming. The rice they farm is a divine gift and thereby sacred. Farming rice, as I noted earlier, has profound religious dimensions not just because of the rituals required, but also the care it demands on the farmers not to abuse the participatory agency of nature (nonhuman creatures). For that reason, many Diola people are reluctant to sell rice for cash.

Diola self-understanding, construction of reality, anthropology-cosmology, and theology cannot be understood without a good grasp of traditional liturgical rituals they practice.<sup>22</sup> In a recent article published in the *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South*, I briefly discussed Diola religion in general and how it is still the lens that most Diola people converted to Islam or Christianity continue to use to observe some aspects of their faith traditions especially when faced with various hardships for which Christianity or Islam has no answer.<sup>23</sup> So, a Muslim or Christian Diola might visit a shrine when faced with natural or human-caused disasters. The supreme deity *Ala Émit*<sup>24</sup> is believed to condescend in order to meet human needs at the shrines where services are officiated by priests on a wide range of needs worshippers might reveal. Diola religion and egalitarian society regulated by their faith traditions would soon be disrupted and nearly abolished by French colonization.

<sup>20</sup> Pablo Palmeri, *Living with the Diola of Mof Avvi: The Account of an Anthropological Research in Sénégal* (Padova: Libreria Editrice Univeristà di Padova, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Nazaire N. Diatta, "Participation du Joola chrétien aux rites traditionnels," *Téléma* 46 (avril-juin, 1986): 67–81; Diatta, "Et si Jésus-Christ est," 49–73; Diatta, "rites funéraires traditionnels et liturgie chrétienne: Lieux du dialogue interreligieux," *Téléma* 67–8 (juillet-décembre, 1991): 61–72.

<sup>23</sup> There are about ten Diola subgroups and their responses to Islam and Christianity is not homogenous. For instance, adherence to Islam is more prevalent among the Diola of the northern ridge of the Casamance River than the southern ridge where Christianity dominates. See Aliou Cissé Niang, "Diola Religion," in the *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South*, vol. 1., ed. Mark A. (Lampport: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 221–222; Niang, "Senegal," in the *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South*, vol. 2., ed. Mark A. 710–712.

<sup>24</sup> Since there are many Diola subgroups, one might encounter variable phonetics when it comes to naming the supreme deity. Among the Diola of Mof Avvi, to which I belong, the deity is *Ala Émit*. Others would call the deity *Ata Émit*, *Émitay*, or *Émit*.



## Christianity and colonization

Sandwiched between two European powers during the colonial period, the French in Saint Louis and the Portuguese in the south, Senegalese people and their culture were forever changed. The Casamance is the most fertile region of Senegal and as a result became a highly contested space by colonizers not for its people, but its natural resources. The Portuguese who were then based in Cachue controlled the region and founded Ezeguichor as a post to trade slaves, wax, animal skin, and ivory.<sup>25</sup> Portuguese Christian traders were busier enriching themselves than spreading their version of the Christian message. As Lamin Sanneh observed elsewhere, theirs is the kind of Christianity that "marched in step with the profit-seeking machine of Portuguese commerce."<sup>26</sup> The French managed to infiltrate the region from the estuary of the Casamance River and established trading posts on the islands of Diogue and Carabane, transforming the once Portuguese trading post in 1827 and annexed Ziguinchor.<sup>27</sup>

The French gradually infiltrated northern Senegal as the southern ridge of the Casamance River remained undisturbed until the arrival of Émmanuel Bertrand Bocandé who was stationed at Carabane<sup>28</sup>—a strategic island among others (Saint-Louis and Gorée) facilitating French incursion into Diola country. The first missionaries, the Holy Ghost Fathers, to ever set foot in Essulalu townships, as Baum observed, were respectful of some Diola religious practices such as praying for rain, health, and good harvest—an attempt to establish connections later undermined by their zeal to impose Europeanized practices on their catechumen.<sup>29</sup> Over time, the situation changed gradually with the help of the first native Catholic priests who were instrumental in adapting the Christian message to Diola contexts. The so-called Berlin Conference in 1884–85 must have emboldened Europeans and marked their official move to wrestle the continent's goods from her people, as if the transatlantic slave trade had not done enough damage—the French exploitation of Africans started much earlier in 1828. Entry points to Africa have already been decided on (thanks

<sup>25</sup> Jacqueline Trincas, *Colonisations et religions en Afrique noire: L'exemple de Ziguinchor* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1981), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 23.

<sup>27</sup> Trincas, *Colonisations et religions*, 2–3.

<sup>28</sup> J. Bertrand-Bocandé, G. Debien, and Y. Saint-Martin, "Notes et Document: Emmanuel Bertrand-Bocandé (1812–1881) un Nantais en Casamance," *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 31, no. 1 (1969): 279–302; Barry, *Le Sénégal du XVe au XIXe Siècle*, 384–89. Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Baum, "Emergence of Diola Christianity," 378ff.

to precolonial explorers, traders, and missionary written accounts)<sup>30</sup> that Europeans fought hard to wrest from each other's control as they did in the case of the Island of Gorée.<sup>31</sup>

The Catholic mission led by French priests later established in the Island of Carabane in 1880 had a rough start, but recovered in 1890 and served as the missionary headquarters for most of the townships near the Atlantic Ocean except for the Bandial or Mof Avvi townships.<sup>32</sup> Some French priests from Ziguinchor ministered to the Diola of Mof Avvi in 1926, but ended up leaving due to little success. In the estimation of Berghen and Manga, 85 percent of Mof Avvi dwellers still practiced traditional Diola religion. The number of Christians will gradually increase among the youth not just in Mof Avvi, but also in the surrounding Diola townships. Islam was introduced to Mof Avvi in 1959 by Diola youth seasonal migrants who went to the city to work or to Mandinka Muslim villages to farm peanuts. Christianity will spread to much of the Casamance region from urban to rural spaces—Islands (Saint Louis, Gorée, Diogue, and Carabane).

The doyen on Diola life and thought, Louis-Vincent Thomas, proclaimed the deculturation and acculturation of Diola cultural memory as precipitated by the infiltration of foreign religions and colonization. He opined that,

Sous des influences diverse: Religions importées (Christianisme, Islam), créations des centres urbains, développement de vie politique, syndicale, affirmation de nouveaux besoins, nécessité de gagner de l'argent pour payer l'impôt, instauration de l'économie de traite, multiples mouvements de population facilités par la réalisation des voies de communication, imprégnation par des idées modernes, peut-être aussi un besoin obscur d'autodestruction, la société animiste est en voie de totale dégénérescence. Déjà de nombreuses croyances sont abandonnées ou dénaturées, les chefs coutumiers perdent leur autorité, la mentalité et le comportement

<sup>30</sup> Paul Lesourd, *L'Œuvre civilisatrice et scientifiques des missionnaires Catholiques dans les colonies françaises* (Paris: Sous le patronage du commissariat général de l'exposition coloniale internationale de Paris, 1931).

<sup>31</sup> Lucie Gallistel Colvin, *Historical Dictionary of Senegal*, African Historical Dictionary 23 (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1981); Jean Delcourt, *Histoire du Sénégal* (Dakar, SN: Éditions Clairafrique, 1976); Pierre Xavier Trincas, *Colonization and Régionalisme Ziguinchor en Casamance* (Paris: Éditions de l'ORSTOM, 1984); Geneviève Lecuir-Nemo, Anne-Marie Javouhey: *Fondatrice de la congrégation des sœurs de Saint-Joseph de Cluny (1779–1851)* (Paris: Édition Karthala, 2001); Joseph Roger Benoist, *Histoire de l'Église catholique au Sénégal: du milieu du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle à l'aube du troisième millénaire* (Paris: Édition Karthala, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Berghen et Manga, *Une introduction à un voyage en Casamance*, 204–5.



évoluent et, plus que jamais, la religion du terroir est soumise à une désagrégation rapide.<sup>33</sup>

[Under various influences: Imported religions (Christianity, Islam), creation of urban centers, development of political life, union, assertion of new needs, and needs to earn money to pay the tax, establishment of the economy of trade, multiple movements of population facilitated by the realization of the ways of communication, impregnation by modern ideas, perhaps also an obscure need of self-destruction, animist society is on the way to total degeneration. Many beliefs are already abandoned or misrepresented, customary leaders are losing their authority, mentality and behavior are changing and, more than ever, the religion of the land is subject to rapid disintegration.]

The changes Thomas enumerates have indeed influenced Diola thought and life since the transatlantic slave trade. It was by no means a surrender to foreign influences. The process was arduous and expanded over centuries into much of the colonial period. Modes of resistance to these changes ranged from refusal to honor contracts they were often forced to sign by colonial authorities, pay taxes,<sup>34</sup> armed conflicts against colonial officials, and resilient attempts to preserve their cultural memory.

The irony is that while village space is contested for what it offers such as rice and other resources coveted by empire, the city was also contested—a space for integrating and participating in the newly introduced economy. Young Diola migrants adjusted to new realities introduced by colonization such as getting the newly introduced mode of exchange—money currency, one of the main tools the empire used to control and exploit the colonized. Western education, styled clothing, and other foreign goods were coveted by many. I will return to this topic later. Similarly, the inculturation of Jesus's message for Diola people was also contested as a handful of Diola people who were converted to missionary Christianity echo much of the scorns and rejections some Holy Ghost Fathers once uttered that reduced Diola faith traditions of animal sacrifice as objectionable. It is not uncommon to hear some Diola, lay and clergy alike, characterize their pre-Christian beliefs as satanic, superstitious, or pagan. French colonial geopolitical discourse managed to reduce Diola people to primitive anarchists—a characterization that did much to color how Diola people are viewed to this day. Civilizing Diola people was an expedient project, especially as French needs for food during World War II increased.

<sup>33</sup> Louis-Vincent Thomas, "Les Diola de la Base-Casamance," *Afrique Documents* 51 (Mai 1960): 85–6.

<sup>34</sup> Méguelle, *Chefferie coloniale et égalitarisme diola*, 64–116.

Facing French colonization with its inculturated Christianity gave rise to two main developments among Diola villages. The first, Diola encounter with missionaries and the economic policies introduced by French colonial officials gave rise to increasing seasonal migration from rural to urban contexts such as Ziguinchor and especially Dakar. Second, missionary Christianity, especially as introduced by the Holy Ghost Fathers, underwent a gradual contextualization—a process during which key traditional elements of Diola religion reshaped missionary teachings to engender a formidable Diola Christianity.

### Diola Christianity

Migration and settlement within the West African context in precolonial times was due to natural (drought and famine) as well as human (intergroup conflicts to control fertile land) phenomena. The religious crisis engendered by imperial missionary Christianity among Diola people underwent a significant novation, right after World War II, as observed by Baum, especially

with a cadre of Diola Catholic priests and cross-culturally aware missionaries, new possibilities for a new Diola Christianity became possible. Clergy and new laymen alike became aware of the need to root the Christianity of Diola in the concerns and needs of Diola communities. With members of the Diola community in position of authority and with access to the entire Scriptures, this process could begin. The new Christian leaders sought to develop the points of contact between Christianity and Diola traditions and to build their religious edifice on a shared foundation. This implied a reaffirmation of Diola cultural vitality that would distinguish them from other Christians and an involvement of Christian beliefs and practices in the daily lives of Diola Christians.<sup>35</sup>

Conceivably, the novation Baum is referring to is not limited to Essulalu Diola Christianity, but most of Diola country. To say these changes are comprehensive would be overdrawn. Some Diola did in fact abandon traditional values and it would be naïve to generalize the resulting novation. Inculturated Christianity is what Father Nazaire N. Diatta, one among many Senegalese-born priests reading the Bible with some of his Diola faith traditions, passionately called for. Unfortunately, much of his language echoes a Western theological worldview. For instance, in pinpointing how the process of inculturation of the church in Diola culture might look, Diatta opines that it is the church's role to "elevate and heal

<sup>35</sup> Baum, "Emergence of Diola Christianity," 394–5.



peoples' cultures."<sup>36</sup> The verb "élever" which Diatta uses transitively could mean to "raise" or "increase" the standing of a person or a thing from inferiority to a superior stature and status. I am surprised about Diatta's use of this word since it recalls much of the colonial missionary objectifications and denigration of African Traditional Religion—a practice legitimating assimilation policy and French missionary Christianization from the colonial towns (Saint Louis, Gorée, Dakar, and Rufisque) to Diola county.

In spite of my reservation about some of Father Diatta's terminologies, he offers some key insights on how a Diola might inculturate the biblical message. At stake is how might a Diola Christian participate in traditional Diola rituals and still be Christian. As is clear, this question of participation in traditional rituals was raised about a century earlier, as Baum documented, when the Holy Ghost Fathers attempted to convert Diola people. Diola responses to the gospel preached by these earliest missionaries were mixed. Christianity was either embraced by a handful of Diola people (especially youth seeking education), inculturated by others, and rejected by most elders. Diola initiation rituals are not just festive occasions for conspicuous consumption. They include an interwoven tapestry of practices that proclaim life from birth, initiation rites, marriage, work, death, and salvation. In the reflections Diatta made, one cannot understand the Diola without a good grasp of Diola initiation rituals. I concur.

This conclusion resulted from his attempt to address a question that puzzled many Diola Christians since, I would argue, the beginning of Christianity in Diola country: "Is it still possible, at home, to call ourselves Christians without renouncing one's deepest African being?"<sup>37</sup> A related question he also discussed is, should Diola Christians participate in the traditional rites?<sup>38</sup> The efforts of Diatta to inculturate the gospel should be admired, but Diatta does not go far enough. The Diola male rite of passage known as *buhut* has a profound religious dimension, which Diatta knows is a ritual process through which they symbiotically assimilate with nature/cosmos. Diola religion is not Satanism, idolatry, or superstition antagonistic to the ministry of Jesus, but proclaims human and nature relations, wellbeing, and communalism under the aegis of *Ala Emit*.

The Negritude movement might be credited with paving the way for such a momentous change, as Baum observes.<sup>39</sup> Ironically, some elements

<sup>36</sup> Diatta, "Participation du Diola Chrétien," 72; Moustapha Tamba, *Histoire et sociologie des religions au Sénégal* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016); Théodore Ndok Ndiaye, *Quel Sénégal pour demain?: Une vision chrétienne et citoyenne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Diatta, "Et si Jésus-Christ," 50, "Est-il encore possible, chez nous, de se dire chrétiens sans renier son être profond d'Africain?"

<sup>38</sup> Diatta, "Participation du Diola chrétien," 67–81.

<sup>39</sup> Baum, "Emergence of a Diola Christianity."

of the Holy Ghost Fathers' Europeanized Christianity still flare up to this day as I noted earlier. Europeanized marriages, associations of expressions of African Traditional Religion with Satan, evil, paganism, and backwardness can be heard from many Sunday sermons and Bible studies to this day. In spite of these setbacks, the resolute task of making a home for Jesus's message among Diola people is alive and well. Father Diatta's work sheds much light on how a Diola who is not *dépaysé* "rootless" might engage the Bible contextually. Insights on how a Diola Christian and Diola traditionalist might participate in each other's rituals has been a key concern of his as well as a handful of Catholic priests currently serving in the Casamance.<sup>40</sup> In Diatta's estimation, Diola beliefs and initiation rituals would help them understand the function and significance of Jesus in their lives.<sup>41</sup> His observation on what I might term the cultural construction of reality is clearly stated in the following words:

Si la culture définit la personne, alors la participation aux grands rites liturgiques est une volonté de se reprendre dans sa culture même, une volonté de se situer, de se découvrir comme être relationnel en participation. Si l'être Joola se définit comme maillon d'une structure sociale, économique, religieuse, alors quand les jeunes repartent aux initiations—lieu d'expression de la culture où ils découvrent qui ils sont structurellement—ils se découvrent des existants.<sup>42</sup>

[If the culture defines the person, then the participation in the great liturgical rites is a will to take again in its very culture, a will to be located, to discover itself as to be relational in participation. If the Diola is defined as a link of a social, economic, religious structure, then when the young people return to the initiation—place of expression of the culture where they discover who they are structurally—they discover themselves as human beings.]

A recovery of some demonized Diola beliefs and practices, in Father Diatta's estimation, is an indispensable rehabilitation optic through which a culture lives on and innovates. Diola traditional rituals are foundational to how Diola people understand themselves, the world, and the deity they worship. Repositioning themselves into the matrix on their traditional liturgical rituals neither questions, nullifies, nor contradicts their faith in Jesus Christ. Father Diatta adds,

<sup>40</sup> See Tamba, *Histoire et sociologie des religions au Sénégal*, and Ndiaye, *Quel Sénégal pour demain*.

<sup>41</sup> Diatta, "Participation du Joola chrétien," 67–81; Diatta, "Et si Jésus-Christ est," 49–73; Diatta, "rites funéraires traditionnels et liturgie chrétienne," 61–72; Diatta, "Nécessité d'une formation adéquate des pasteurs: Quelle formation pour les gens de pastoral en Afrique?" *Téléma* 61 (Janvier–mars, 1990): 39–51.

<sup>42</sup> Diatta, "rites funéraires traditionnels et liturgie chrétienne," 77.



Mais c'est justement en étant présent que le Joola chrétien, parce que chrétien, va sentir la réorientation effective à donner à impulser, à la coutume et dans le fond et dans la forme, pour arriver à décentrer le Joola de lui-même et le recentrer sur Dieu; pour passer donc de l'anthropocentrisme de la religion traditionnelle au théocentrisme chrétien. Voilà le devoir du chrétien et ce qui justifie sa participation aux rites funéraires, aux initiations . . . Voilà à quoi, on doit, en tout cas le former aujourd'hui.<sup>43</sup>

[But it is precisely by being present that the Christian Joola, because Christian, will feel the actual reorientation to give impulse, custom, and in the background and in the form, to arrive to decenter the Joola of itself and refocus on God; to go from the anthropocentrism of traditional religion to Christian theocentrism. This is the duty of the Christian and what justifies his participation in funeral rites, initiations . . . That is in what we should, at least, train him today.]

Instead of Christianity reorienting Diola Christians, as Father Diatta contends, I would say Diola Christians were contextualizing the Christian message, as the catechism taught by some of the first Catholic missionaries was increasingly being Europeanized. This phenomenon was not unique to Diola people. Most of sub-Saharan Christianity was and is still affected by a Western-shaped Christianity to this day.

I was struck by an essay I read on interreligious dialogue that echoes the damages caused by missionary discourse against African Traditional Religion.<sup>44</sup> The experience of SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai illustrates my point clearly. He recounts what I believe recalls the Petrine conversion recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 10–11) while serving as a Catholic missionary in Nigeria. The biblical text I am referring to has Peter saying to Cornelius: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34–35 NRS). Ahiokhai learned how Indigenous Religion and its priestess were objectified by Christians as "devil worship"; he visited, against the advice of his guide, and befriended a "devil worshipper."<sup>45</sup> As it turns out, like the supreme deity she worships, the priestess was "just, honest, kind, loving, hospitable, and respectable of everyone."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Diatta, "rites funéraires traditionnels et liturgie chrétienne," 79.

<sup>44</sup> SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai, "Interreligious Friendship: A Path to Conversion for a Catholic Theologian," in *Interreligious Friendship After Nostra Aetate*, Interreligious Studies in Theory and Practice, ed. James L. Fredericks and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 187–200.

<sup>45</sup> Ahiokhai, "Interreligious Friendship," 188.

<sup>46</sup> Ahiokhai, "Interreligious Friendship," 189. See also, Marinus Chijioke Iwuchukwu, "Interreligious Friendship: Symbiosis of Human Relationship vis-à-vis Religious Differences—A Christian Encounter with Two African Traditional Religionists," in *Interreligious Friendship After Nostra Aetate*, Interreligious Studies in

In spite of being pushed into liminal space by the very Christians who were supposed to have received the priestess with love and compassion, her temperament, which many Christians would identify with Christian virtues, is exemplary for followers of Jesus.

### Village and city as contested spaces

Two phenomena explain Diola youth seasonal migrations to cities. First, Diola youths migrate for economic reasons. Peanut farming did affect much of Diola life and thought, especially among converts to Islam of the northern ridge of the Casamance River, as noted by many ethnographers. Many Diola of the southern ridge, especially of Mof Avvi still prioritize rice farming to this day, but there were increasing pressures to join peanut farming due to the lucrative economic gains it promises—monetary currency and participation in the world market. It also introduced an unusual competition for monetary control that threatened Diola egalitarian society. Single and married men began to clear the forest to make room for larger peanut farms to increase capital. Since then, many turned away from their rice fields to farm peanuts that engendered two problems: a move that led to the impoverishment of the land. But, a complex set of factors contributed to the increasing flow of Diola youth migrants to cities from the time before colonization to this day. The introduction of peanuts as the main cash crop, foreign religions (Christianity and Islam), cultural encounters, and frequent droughts have been cited by ethnographers as key reasons for migration. In spite of the many changes Diola people faced, many still consider work, especially rice farming as sacred, and courage, honesty, and mutuality are valued virtues.<sup>47</sup>

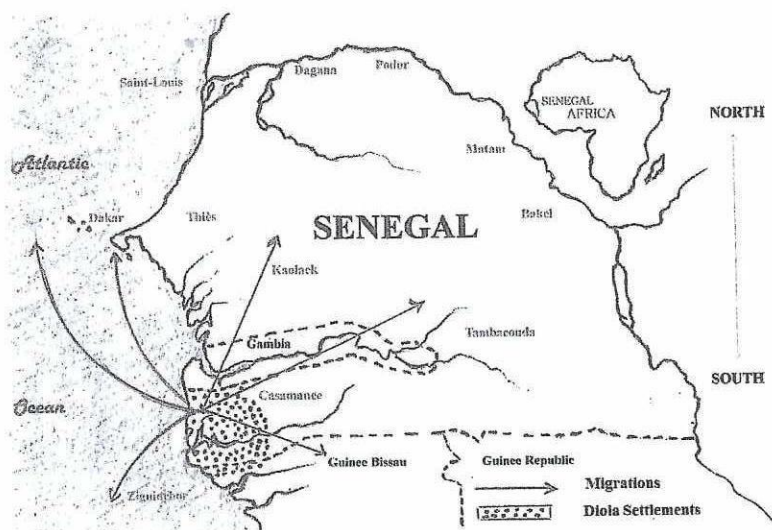
Second, impoverished land, cleared forests, and increasingly rare rain forced many Diola people to leave their villages to cities during the dry season. Immigration and migration are perennial dynamic human phenomena. Natural and human caused disasters are the main drivers in either case. This is true especially in the case of realities that are unfolding before us today with global immigration crises. Economic needs and conflicts (such as war) are responsible for human movement. Reasons often cited by many immigrants include the desire to improve life conditions—economics or safety (especially in war-torn countries) as being the reasons for leaving their villages, cities, or countries. In this essay, I focus on seasonal migrations from village to city, from city to village, and from village to another village of many Diola youth and adults from Enampor

Theory and Practice, eds. James L. Fredericks and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 201–214.

<sup>47</sup> Berghen et Manga, *Une introduction*, 277–8. See also Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, 112–13.



and Séléki. Senegalese people call these movements *nawetaan*—a Wolof meaning “working away from home during the rainy season.”<sup>48</sup> The reverse meaning applies to young and adult seasonal Diola migrants who would return home to farm rice only during the rainy season (see map).



Diola migration destinations within Senegal, to other African countries, Europe, and the Americas some of which are permanent, but most remain seasonal.

The phenomenon occurs during a specific period of each year. Rice farming begins in the earliest rainfall (mid to late May) and ends with harvest (mid to late November). From December to early May, many young people migrate to cities where they often work as maids, watchmen, masons, and the like. As soon as the first rain began to fall, many young Diola who migrated to the cities would stop their city jobs to return to their villages to farm their rice fields.<sup>49</sup> In the village, all activities carried out in the dry season would be halted and everyone refocuses on a single

<sup>48</sup> Jean-Léopold Diouf, *Dictionnaires Wolof-Français et Français-Wolof* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2003), 238. Wolof is the only national language widely spoken besides French. The transitive verb *nawet*, “to spend the rainy season,” is not to be confused with its noun form which simply means “rainy season.” Also, the antonym of *nawetaan* (*naweta:n*) has come to mean “sport games held during the rainy season,” especially soccer. My translation of the French text.

<sup>49</sup> Louis-Vincent Thomas, “Esquisse sur les mouvements de populations et les contacts Socio-culturels en pays Diola (Basse-Casamance),” *Bulletin de L'institut Français d'Afrique noire* (1960): 486–507.

task, rice farming—preparing rice nurseries, and fields for planting the paddies. Aline Sitoé Diatta worked in Dakar as a maid and it was there that she received her prophetic call.<sup>50</sup>

Diola youths and adults negotiated the natural seasonal conditions and new realities imposed on them by the French empire. Many youths were attracted to the new possibilities and hope for a better life, away from their arduous rice farming world, urban life promises, and migrate seasonally to cities for economic reasons taking on jobs that range from higher education to army, police, nursing, hotel attendants, gatekeeping, etc. Girls worked as maids. Most adults tend to remain, but some do migrate to other villages bordering the Casamance River or Lagoons in search for better fisheries or forests with dense palm tree tap wine to improve their economic livelihood. Marie-Christine Cormier sees in these seasonal movements a gradual move from seasonal migration to a full-blown rural exodus toward cities. Fortunately, government organizations and church charities are gradually slowing down the flow of seasonal migrations with the creation of rural job opportunities.<sup>51</sup> Christian charities, social organizations, and associations team up to contribute to the needs of villagers in the areas of fishing, gardening, digging fresh water wells, donating wheelbarrows, means of transportation, construction of anti-salt dams, hotels, and tourist camps. Measures discouraging seasonal or permanent migrations range from baiting youths with incentives and imposing fees on those who tended to abandon rural life.

Most traditionalist Diola of the southern ridge of the Casamance River are known for their strong attachment to their ancestral traditional beliefs that they often practice in urban rather than rural settings. Those who resettle in cities such as Ziguinchor, Kaolack, Dakar Saint Louis, or overseas do return for about a month or two vacation or to observe traditional women and men rituals. Low paying job rates are mitigated with the creation of migrant associations corporate accounts designed to meet financial needs such as living expenses, funerals, and burial expenses (in cases where the dead are transported and buried back in their native village), marriage and other festive expenses, and remittance. To date, Diola country is heavily Christianized with more Catholics, lay and clergy, than any other Christian group of the Protestant denominations in Senegal.<sup>52</sup> This Senegalese Christianity is lived with an African traditional garb as debates as to whether it should reflect African religious rituals

<sup>50</sup> Girard, *Genèse du pouvoir charismatique*, 226.

<sup>51</sup> Marie-Christine Cormier, “Les jeunes Diola face à l'exode rural,” *Cahier ORSTOM. Séries Sciences Humaines* xxi/2–3 (1985): 267–73.

<sup>52</sup> Ndiaye, *Quel Sénégal pour demain?*, 130–135; Tamba, *Histoire et sociologie des religions au Sénégal*, 296–298.



continue.<sup>53</sup> Today, many jobs are held by Diola people in both administrative and private sectors. Whether Protestant or Catholic, many Diola who embrace Christianity are in many cases *rehabilitated Diola Christians* who learn to be proud again of their identity and most of their traditional practices. It is often noted that another factor cited that encouraged Diola Christian migration to cities was their new status due to literacy imparted by missionaries. A combination of the two phenomena forced some Diola youths to migrate to Europe and America.

## CONCLUSION

I hope I have clearly presented how colonization and Europeanized Christianity influenced Diola culture and religion and how both phenomena engendered cultural, religious, identity, and economic crises and continue to be the strong spurs for not just seasonal, but also permanent migrations to this day.<sup>54</sup> The roots of these crises reach back to the onset of European and African encounters, namely the transatlantic slave trade, colonization, and *global user-satellization*.<sup>55</sup> From the conversation I had with some hotel staff while I was in Dakar in May 2018, I learned that most of them were Diola Christians. They talked about the preparations they were making to return to their respective villages by the first rainfall to farm their sacred crop—rice. Similarly, Diola Muslims look forward to their seasonal homecoming for the same reason—helping their family members farm either rice or peanut field. Almost all would return to their respective villages to observe traditional rituals their forefathers and foremothers practiced since time immemorial. They were seasonal migrants. To date, Diola country is one of the most Christianized of the Senegalese regions. These Diola Christians have neither forgotten nor abandoned their most cherished religious traditions—a reality shared by many Senegalese—both Muslims and Christians. As for the future of Diola Christianity, it depends on how much Senegalese people of faith negotiate a way out of and yet, in a balanced conversation with Western influence.

<sup>53</sup> Tamba, *Histoire et sociologie des religions au Sénégal*, 297–298.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas, “Les Diola de la Base-Casamance,” 85; Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, 110–12.

<sup>55</sup> Ndiaye, *Quel Sénégal pour demain?*, 132–133.

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