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Ritual Space and Religion

Young West African Muslims in Berlin, Germany

Abdoulaye Sounaye

How do refugees/migrants live and practice their religion in their new environment? And where do they find space for ritual practices such as prayer, wedding, and naming ceremonies, breaking the fast, etc., especially when they are in a double minority situation? How does their new environment in return affect their practices and perceptions of religion and religiosity, in times of dramatic change? Embracing religion and making it a reason to join specific groups and communities could be part of the experience of both forced and voluntary displacement. How do we account for such experiences when migrants and refugees attempt to make a living, secure residence and social status?

Following the so-called refugee crisis that resulted from the Syrian and Libyan wars, statements from state institutions in Germany have emphasized integration as a way to *make space* and, at the same time, *place* and accept refugees. Accommodation and spatial organization, as Alexander-Kenneth Nagel's chapter in this volume alerts us, have been part of this process. The pronouncements have consistently used *integration* to underline the humanitarian policy of the government and push for openness of the German society. This policy line translated into concrete measures such as *Willkommensklassen* and *Integrationsklassen* that are courses intended to facilitate refugees' transition into German society. How does religion become a factor in this process? What are those expected to integrate or be integrated doing to make space and place for themselves?

This chapter focuses on young Muslims from West Africa who found themselves in Berlin after the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011. Having arrived as migrant workers before the country's civil war, many of these young people were trapped and forced to cross the Mediterranean Sea to seek refuge in Europe.

Once in their new environment, what spaces were available to them for religious practice? How did they use those spaces? What strategies of appropriation did they use to make a space of their own in a city known for its secularism, leftism, and humanitarianism, but yet to experience such a “flow” of migrants from West Africa?

Accounts of religion in contexts of displacement and migration have pointed to the ways in which the experience of changing place, moving, and settling in a new environment could affect practices and perceptions of religion (Vecchio 2016; Bass 2014; Grodź, Smith, and Adogame 2014; Olupona and Gemignani 2007; Adogame 2005). As I will show, ritual spaces such as mosques serve not only a religious purpose but also a social inscription agenda in a city where West African Muslims struggle to avoid marginalization, vulnerability, exclusion, and outright discrimination, even among their coreligionists. In conversations, my interlocutors have used the “Turkish model” to refer to the ways in which Berliners from Turkish background have managed to find and create a set of social and religious infrastructures that allow them to secure a space of their own.

As several studies on religion and African migrants to the West have shown, displacement can have a significant impact on religious communities, perceptions, and practice. In return, religion often contributes to social inscription, that is, a process through which individuals, groups, and communities attempt to have a life of their own as they discover and navigate their new environment (Nieswand 2010; Olupona and Gemignani 2007; Grodź, Smith, and Adogame 2014; Adogame 2005; Gaibazzi, Dünnwald, and Bellagamba 2017; Gutekunst et al. 2016).

Those I refer to in this chapter as my interlocutors are young migrants and refugees from West Africa, mostly in their twenties and thirties with whom I had regular conversations from 2014 through 2018 at gatherings in their apartments, in cafes, in mosques, during Muslim festivals, or in parks across Berlin. They found in religion an important resource to rely on as they face the predicaments of living in Berlin and negotiate the terms of their social conditions, in particular (im)mobility, vulnerability, and residence status.

A Quick Note of Context: Beyond the Economy

The study of migration and displacement in Africa-EU connections suddenly regained steam, as Libya collapsed and Jihadi movements arose in the Maghreb and the Sahel-Sahara regions. This development has prompted a number

of observations and arguments intended to shed light on a multilayered phenomenon. The new trend of EU-bound migration has not only affected policies intended to continue and reinforce the externalization of EU frontiers both physical and imagined but also illustrated how social, political, and economic dynamics entangle Europe and Africa (Pries 2018; Beauchemin 2018; Gaibazzi, Dünnwald, and Bellagamba 2017).

In this context, political discourses on migration have raised concerns over what some called the “death of Europe” as a consequence of an “uncontrollable flow” of young Africans (Murray 2018). The “African scramble for Europe” and the “Africanization of Europe theory” (Smith 2019) are two variants of a discourse that is used to alarm against both a so-called refugee crisis and a migration trend that is primarily viewed as a menace. As the Africanization theory suggests, the “flow” of young Africans threatens to make Europe African and therefore unsettle a peaceful and balanced continent. Earlier works on migration from Africa to Europe have already pointed to this fear of “an African invasion of illegal migrants,” as Beauchemin puts it. Indeed, while the idea of an “invasion” may simply be a myth (Haas 2008a), it has nevertheless drawn controversy, fear (Murray 2018), and policies that affect now not only migration as a process but how African migrants are perceived and treated (Beauchemin 2018; Grodź, Smith, and Adogame 2014; Schinkel 2017; Bass 2014; Acroni 2016). Images of young men jumping over the fences of the enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta and police forces countering them have contributed to reinforce this fear (Haas 2008b) and justify, in the eyes of many, not only “Fortress Europe” but also its underlying policies.

Berlin was rocked in 2012 when a group of young West Africans and their local support network challenged these policies in what is known as the Oranienplatz movement, a struggle against German and European immigration policies (Fontanari 2018; Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2018; Swiffen and Nichols 2017; Monforte 2014). On that occasion, civil society organizations, refugee groups, and religious organizations joined forces to fight for residence status and “humane conditions to refugees and migrants,” among whom many of my interlocutors.

Clearly, the repercussions of the Africanization and invasion narratives extend beyond the economic realm and affect the perception of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, and what social space they are entitled to in Europe today. While my discussion focuses on Berlin, it must be said that across Germany voices have consistently attempted to influence state policies and public opinion¹ for the “right and appropriate measures” to treat humanely refugees or to counter

“migration flows” and “sharianisation,” as the *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (*Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident*), Pegida, would put it. The Islam debate, as one may put it, has a long history in Germany, like in most of Europe. It has become more public while taking passionate and emotional turns, fueling both a nationalism and an islamophobia that fear a growing Muslim presence or even dominance (Sarrazin 2018, 2012), and worry about how migrants “prey on the country’s diminishing welfare benefits” (Solibakke 2012: 219).

Living in Berlin, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants from West Africa were caught in the middle of this heated debate which, in many ways, has created categories of bad refugees/migrants (those that “cannot learn German and do not change”) and good refugees/migrants (those that “integrate and respect German laws”).² Being black and Muslim makes them a prime target of the rising and nationalist discourse of Pegida, according to which they are “bad.”

Although these debates tend to focus on the economy to a large extent, they have also regularly emphasized securitization of migration (Mavelli and Wilson 2017) in times of refugee crisis and jihadi threat. This adds a surveillance component to the critical issue of managing immigration (Gaibazzi, Dünwald, and Bellagamba 2017). Reinforcing checkpoints at borders, systematic fingerprinting, and creating common databases, in order to control the mobility of migrants, are all parts of a state instrumentation that reduces immigration policies to a security concern. “Protecting” and “securing our borders” are phrases that one regularly hears among state officials, security officers, as well as concerned ordinary citizens.

My attempt at analyzing the case of West African Muslims in Berlin opens a window onto the modes through which refugees/migrants become qualified as a social problem not only because they need assistance but also because they socially inscribe themselves in a sociopolitical environment as they make their social space. Churches as well as mosques in Berlin have proved central to this process in the last five years, especially for many migrants and refugees who get disconnected, are left with little or no resources, and feel robbed of their lives.

Like in many other contexts in Europe, during the recent refugee crisis, religious organizations and institutions have played a major role in assisting refugees and migrants to rebuild their lives (cf. Horstmann and Jung 2015a). Mosques, churches, and other civil society organizations have been particularly active in providing assistance to refugees during that time. The religious segment of the city, in particular, was among the most involved in relaying the motto once very perceptible across Berlin: *Refugees Are Welcome*. The search for ritual space

in that context and the initiatives it leads to are part of a self-representation (Frederiks 2014; Grodź and Smith 2014) process that has become central to refugees' and migrants' perception of their own agency. It is also central to the ways in which they search for and define a place of their own (Mandel 1996).

Placemaking, as a way people insert themselves into a particular social setting, and making one's own place, as a way to exercise agency and transform one's conditions in that setting, are two necessary conditions for human life. Many would actually argue that they are at the foundation of *humane* existence. Refugee and migrant experiences in Berlin are shaped by this twin-process as they feel not only robbed of their lives but also profoundly immobilized and incapacitated by both the structures set to accommodate them and the negative discourses pertaining to them.

This is so especially as young West Africans strive to make a space and a *life of their own*. Having a choice, deciding where to perform ritual and how, that is, under what conditions, were key concerns for my interlocutors. For many of them, Berlin proved not the end, but the culmination of an ordeal. In fact, as Mo (Conversation at Café Kotti, Berlin. May 14, 2017) put it, from braving state borders in West Africa, to defying the Sahara harsh conditions and surviving the "slave-like conditions in Libya," their journey has been one of *wahala*, a Hausa concept that captures the lost hopes of youth and the distress of the disenfranchised in general.

Being a Muslim in Muslim Berlin

When Mohamed, one of my interlocutors who spent seven years in Khadafi's Libya, landed in Berlin after he transited via Lampedusa and Italy, he was told not to worry. As there were many Muslims and mosques in Berlin, it wouldn't be a problem for him to integrate. Indeed, and although they account only for around 10 percent of the overall population, Muslims form a dynamic and active demographic group that shapes life in this city known for its libertarian norms and lifestyles (Bendixsen 2013; Ewing 2008). Berliners pride themselves on being open, tolerant, and welcoming. Berlin's popular neighborhoods, such as Neukölln, Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain, Mitte, and Prenzlauer Berg, host various nationalities, and people with different political orientations and economic backgrounds.

This diversity and the possibilities of interactions and community organizing Berlin offers have made it a prime political arena and a hub of cultural, artistic

creativity, especially among young people. Among migrants and refugees from Africa too, Berlin became popular, especially with the recent flow that followed the Syrian and the Libyan crises. Many Berliners contributed a great deal in invigorating the “Refugees are welcome” and the Oranienplatz³ movements which rose to push for pro-immigration policies, but also promote the opening up of the German society.

Public opinion and the initiatives taken by groups and civil society in Berlin contributed to inflect public policy, but they also gave the city a reputation of hospitality, especially among West Africans. Unlike many cities in Europe and even in Germany, Berlin was perceived by many as “a bright spot” and multicultural enough to be the “next destination.” “Lorsqu’on était en Italie, on a beaucoup entendu parler de l’Allemagne, mais surtout de Berlin. Après avoir passé trois mois à travailler dans une municipalité, finalement, mes amis et moi, nous avons pris la route et nous sommes venus à Berlin” (Mo, conversation 14-5-2017). In those terms, Berlin appeared as a promise. This rush to Berlin, as one may call it, coincided with a policy change in Italy—the first European land after the Mediterranean Sea—which allowed asylum seekers in the country to migrate up north to seek regularization and better fortune. Several of my interlocutors “received 500 or 1,000 euros,” and were told to “try up north because Italy doesn’t have enough to take care of everyone” (Idriss, Conversation at Café Kotti, Berlin. June 7, 2017). That journey led many to Berlin, where they eventually joined forces with groups who were already established and organizing for refugee rights and protection.

Strictly speaking, there is no quarter of the city known as Muslim Berlin, although some quarters will have more Muslims than others, as is the case in most cities in Germany. The concept of Muslim Berlin refers here to the institutions, groups, and organizations spread across the city which have sought to keep, promote, and nurture a Muslim identity. And for that reason, they have concurred to create an environment conducive to Islamic practices and Muslim lifestyle.⁴ With this picture in mind, one could easily draw the conclusion that Muslim Berlin is diverse, multiethnic, and multinational, and encompasses numerous groups, organizations, and institutions, from the Turkish Islamic organizations and German Islam Conference (*Deutsche Islamkonferenz*) to the African mosque and the Ahmadiyya (Wunn and Mohaghegh 2007). Furthermore, and as one may also guess, it is fragmented and informed by many theological orientations, from the Habashi⁵ group to the Salafi and the Shia. One could even equate it to a micro-Muslim world. Indeed, in many ways, as I have realized, it forms a microcosm which has its own dynamics, politics, and prejudices.

The particularity of the young people I focus on is that they are a minority within a minority group (Schader 2017)—a group of Muslims within a Muslim community which is already demographically a minority in Berlin. For many, being black in Muslim Berlin comes with challenges such as xenophobic sentiments which take discriminatory forms. Scholars have used the trope of visibility/invisibility to characterize the conditions of West Africans, in particular Muslims, in Europe (Ter Taar 1998). The case I discuss echoes such conditions, although one has to note that the protest movement of 2012 and the Syria refugee experience have affected significantly the ways in which sub-Saharan Africans are perceived and organize themselves.

In many ways, my interlocutors are all but invisible. But not every visibility is welcome, as they would say. While visibility becomes an ally which helps them both raise awareness about their dire conditions and keep the hope of getting legal residence, they have also experienced visibility as an issue while they try to settle and be part of the complexion of the city. In our conversations, they have regularly expressed unease and concerns over the publicity the so-called refugee crisis has brought to them: “On parle trop de nous,” said Issa, a young man from Burkina. “Dès qu’on vient dans un lieu, on nous voit et regarde” (Moussa, Conversation at Umar Mosque, Berlin. February 17, 2018). In this situation, their minority condition ends up exposing them in public life, in their interactions with other Muslims, but also with immigration services. With this administration in particular, their visibility ends up burdening their interlocutors and those official structures from which they seek assistance.

Adding the fact that most of them are newcomers to Berlin, navigating these conditions has proven challenging, especially when they felt discriminated and victim of unfair treatment. Among my interlocutors, their experiences go from outright discrimination to pouring support. “I expected Muslims to be more open and welcoming. What I received was less than what I expected; I was better treated by Christian organizations and churches. I really thought our Muslim fellows would be welcoming us in their mosques. On the contrary, some didn’t even want to pray next to us” (Idriss, Conversation at African Mosque. April 21, 2018). As Idriss explains, many of them decided to come to Berlin because they had heard that Berlin is more welcoming and home to a large Muslim community: “on avait entendu que Berlin était ouverte et accueillante, et qu’il y avait une grande communauté musulmane dans la ville. On avait quitté l’Italie pour cela.”

Safia, a Ghanaian woman who came to Berlin in 2014, relates her experience in a mosque: “As you know, women do not pray with men; so I joined the women’s corner in the mosque, but I felt unwelcome. I felt some women did not want to pray next to me. In the end, I was praying alone” (Safia, Conversation in

Wedding, Berlin. September 22, 2017). Although there are more West African men than women, a numerical reality that may favor their acceptance among Muslims, men face similar issues and often narrate their relationship to other Muslims on a critical tone as they also feel feared, unwelcomed, and marginalized, and are not even “getting the treatment one Muslim could expect from other Muslims” (Habu, Conversation at Café Kotti, Berlin. October 17, 2019). One of my male interlocutors who has been living in Berlin for more than thirty years observed that “we are all Muslims, but no Turkish or Arab woman would marry a Sub-Saharan African” (Sale, Conversation at Umar Mosque, Berlin. October 19, 2019). Experiences of this kind lead Mohamed to question the Umma: “On nous parle de la Ummah musulmane, mais nous n’avons pas vu cela. Au contraire, nous avons eu beaucoup plus de solidarité de la part des Églises et des Chrétiens” (Mohamed, Conversation at Umar Mosque, Berlin. August 12, 2018).

This perspective on the Umma could amount to a critique of Islam and non-West African Muslims, in particular Muslim Berlin and the treatment it offers other coreligionaries. In fact, many have also reported mistreatment in Libya, a Muslim majority country where they spent time prior to their crossing the Mediterranean, yet they seem to be more critical of Berlin’s context.

Searching for a Ritual Space, Constituting a Social Space

My interlocutors have regularly articulated a claim of belonging which is based on commonality of religion, but also produces expectations to be welcomed and well treated as part of the Umma. As we shall see, the search for a ritual space is intricately linked to that of a social space. A mosque, for example, is not just a space for daily prayers and Dhikr.⁶ For many, praying in the Omar Khattab⁷ mosque is also part of a practice that constitutes a social space, especially in a migration/refugee context. On the one hand, the mosque has profiled itself as an institution devoted to serve migrants and refugees, offering them a prayer community; on the other hand, my interlocutors have often used the mosque as a rallying point. The Friday congregational prayer, for example, determines the time and the venue of many of their activities, in particular group meetings which are generally held after the prayer and in Café Kotti, a few minutes’ walk from the mosque.

Not all of them, however, go to Omar Khattab Mosque. Besides the reputation of the mosque being under watch by German security services,⁸ several Ghanaians, for example, prefer to travel to Khadija Mosque in Pankow, the main Ahmadi ritual space in Berlin. Tidjaniyya followers have also expressed similar

attitudes. Thus, affiliations and sectarianism are important factors that shape the search for both ritual and social spaces.⁹ Issa, a Sunni Muslim who found himself once in the Tempelhof Shia mosque, felt unease and eventually decided not to return there. Many have, however, downplayed theological cleavages and sectarianism. As they adapt to the situation and relax on these cleavages, at the same time, they rethink their theological affiliations and religious concepts they have taken for granted. In fact, I have rarely heard arguments along religious lines or leanings among my interlocutors. Though they know their differences and somewhat cultivate them, along, for example, national and generational lines, they have silenced arguments and have sought to establish a communal space, an initiative that further transpired as a claim to the city (cf. Sacks 2013; Chattopadhyay 2005). Community organizing, NGO initiatives in collaboration with Berlin-based humanitarian activists, and participation in public events such as demonstrations and debates and fund-raising contributed to this claim. In this context, too, the Oranienplatz refugee protest camp became an inspiring model of how groups and organizations claim space and status¹⁰ (see Figure 9.1 a, b, c, and d).

Figure 9.1 (a) Omar Mosque from the street. (b) Screen carrying French translation of the sermon. (c) Fellows praying inside the Omar Khattab Mosque. (d) Fellows greeting each other after Eid prayers; all photos by Abdoulaye Sounaye.

The First African Mosque in Berlin (FAM)

Like in many cities in Europe, in Berlin, too, Muslims from West Africa sought to gather, organize, and set up their own social and religious infrastructures. The Murid case in Italy (Kaag 2008; Marabello and Riccio 2018; Riccio and Uberti 2013), the Tidjaniyya in France (Accoroni 2011; Cottin 2007), and most recently, the Izala in Hamburg¹¹ are illustrations of these trends and social entrepreneurship. Migrants or refugees, West Africans who ended up in Europe carry various religion-related initiatives not only personally but also as groups or communities. Settled enough in Germany and Berlin and having reached a critical mass of people to perform a congregational prayer, a group led by Muqaddam Masoud Hassan established in the mid-2000s the first initiative for a mosque intended to cater for Muslims from West Africa. The initiative was primarily for English-speaking West Africa, that is, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Gambia. In Masoud's own words, the goal was to assemble Muslims from West Africa and offer them "a venue of their own" (Masoud, Conversation at African Mosque, Berlin. October 21, 2017), especially as their number increased following the Libyan civil war.

The FAM was then thought as an attempt at providing a self-representative group and space for people who have constantly faced the challenges of being both displaced and feeling out of place in Berlin. The FAM is a culmination of a process of carving a communal space, of self-representation, and of being part of Berlin, and therefore claiming the right to be different. As an intervention, it is a way West Africans have found to insert themselves into the activist and political culture of Berlin. Therefore, their search for a communal space is to be interpreted as a step further in their claiming a right to the city (cf. Lefebvre 1991).

The FAM is also referred to as the African Mosque, the First Black African Mosque,¹² stressing its *Africanity* and blackness, so to speak. Being a social space, as most mosques, the FAM has also provided social services, from wedding and naming ceremonies to hosting migrants, especially at the peak of the refugee crisis in 2014–15 in Germany. In a wedding video Nasrul Faida posted on YouTube, the ceremony follows several steps, from the introduction of the bride and the groom to the verbal agreement that would open to the recitation that consecrates and legalizes the marriage. In a typical West African manner, cola nuts are distributed, and elders offer advice to the newly married. And as is customary, the bride is not present; only her representatives are asked for their agreement. Particularly with Ghanaians and Sierra Leoneans, for example, FAM has played a major social role. Each prayer—and especially at *Eid*¹³ time—is an

opportunity to socialize. Ramadan has also turned out to be a major moment of gathering and congregational prayer. *Iftar* usually attracts not only West Africans but also friends from various parts of the Muslim world.¹⁴ FAM has also served to celebrate Independence Days, as one can see in a YouTube video.¹⁵

As already pointed out, the idea of an African mosque emerged as part of the politics of belonging (cf. Yuval-Davis 2006) that made “some feel uncomfortable,” especially when they join some Turkish mosques, as one of my interlocutors noted. Other Muslim groups and communities such as Ahmadi, Alevi, and Habashi have all their own mosques. While this trend can be read as the sign of a dynamic and differentiated Islamic sphere in Berlin, setting up their own mosque allows West Africans also to be socially creative, assert their identity, and institutionalize their presence in an increasingly changing context. Being organized pays off in the sense that it provided many interlocutors with a platform to voice their concerns and a social space. The FAM was then intended to serve West Africans find their place, carve a space for themselves, claim a presence in the city, and, at the same time, distance themselves from others, in particular those considered to be troublemakers and radicalized. In fact, in their Khutbah (Friday sermon), imams at FAM have persistently called Muslims to “abide by the laws of the country” and show the tolerant side of “African Islam” (Masoud, Conversation, Neukölln, Berlin. January 17, 2019).

Over the years, the discourse of being African, tolerant, and a law-abiding Berliner has been further emphasized, especially at the peak of the refugee crisis. In their own words, it “was crucial to show that we are not part of ISIS¹⁶ as some have become in France”¹⁷ (Ali, Conversation at Umar Mosque, Berlin. July 13, 2017). Indeed, as many have lived in, studied in, and traveled through Libya, they felt “suspected of having become radicalized, and potentially supportive of Islamic terrorism” (Ali, Conversation at Umar Mosque, Berlin. July 13, 2017). German security services themselves have shown concern over youth’s radicalization that happens within mosques and, for that reason, have had several mosques under watch, as a mosque manager pointed out.

In more sociological terms, what the FAM allows is a social inscription (Schiller and Caglar 2010; Smith 2005) in an environment where many feel the need to carve a space both religious and social as a way to survive. The consequence is that while the community of Muslims in Berlin increases, ritual spaces also diversify to accommodate practices sometimes uncommon among Muslims in Berlin. For example, the FAM was initially thought of as a Tidjaniyya¹⁸ initiative providing a space for wazifa, the group’s devotional prayer, which was not welcome in other mosques of the city. “We don’t do the Tidjaniyya wazifa,” as an official of the Omar Khattab Mosque pointed out. In

this specific case, officially, the mosque management feared that the sectarian practice would alienate the majority of the mosque community; but it is also known that the wazifa prayer is controversial and rejected by most rigorous and Salafi views.

Both the FAM initiative and the desire to erect an African mosque contribute to what Metcalf has referred to as “the making of the Muslim space” (Metcalf 1996). For my interlocutors, however, this process has to be qualified: it is an inscription in a social context where religion has slowly become an important dimension of their lives, experiences, and identities. Already Muslim, many were not particularly concerned with their Muslimness before they arrive in Berlin. But they engage Islam now in a particular way and with a new awareness, finding in Muslimness and in being part of a mosque community, for example, a key component of their lives.

In Berlin, this “turn to Islam” is not exclusive to West Africans. As Bendixsen notes, youth with Turkish background have also turned to Islam to assert a presence in Berlin. They articulate a discourse that emphasizes their background as Muslims, yet in a particular sociocultural and generational context. They are not necessarily following the practices and the institutions set up by their parents; they experience different living conditions, and moral and political references, and imagine other ways of being Muslim in Berlin.

In the case of West Africans, however, and perhaps more than for the Berliners with Turkish background, space translates into a critical resource, in particular because the marginalization they face is not only political, economic, and social (Bendixsen 2013); it is also religious, as many have pointed out. While many aspects of the daily practices of the FAM community could be understood as a reinvention and *emplacement*¹⁹ of homeland practices, we must note the differentiated character of this resort to Islam and Muslim space making (cf. Read 2012; Englund 2002), in particular in a migration or refugee context. For most of my interlocutors, the primary preoccupation is one of social inscription in a context they try to figure out and navigate the political, economic, and social conditions of their lives. Space and placemaking²⁰ in this instance are not only part of the politics of belonging, tools of differentiation, and social inscription. As Miriam Schader has shown, religion is a powerful political resource and carries an emancipatory potential among West Africans in Europe (Schader 2017). Thus, the preoccupation with setting up the FAM is not so much about a defense of Islam as one may see it in many West African activists with whom religiosity and politics of religion are shaped along that line. Here, the move is intended to create the conditions for particular expressions, practices, and identities (Grodź, Smith, and Adogame 2014) that struggle to be accepted and

established elsewhere. Perhaps more than anything, what the FAM initiative shows is the significance of infrastructure open to identities and religiosities.

The FAM provides a structure for collective action readily convertible into a political resource for a group that arguably includes the most vulnerable in Berlin. With no degree or qualification, economic integration has proved hard for many. Even when they have managed to secure a resident status that would allow them to escape the anxiety of deportation, finding a network and accessing social services may be a challenge. Here again, the FAM has offered a prime opportunity for both ritual practice and networking, similar to the case of the migrant foyers in France (Grodz, Smith, and Adogame 2014) with the only difference that FAM intends to build on “circuits of faith” (Farquhar 2016) while emphasizing Islam, being Muslim from West Africa in Berlin (Figure 9.2 a and b).

My examination of the religion, refugee and migration nexus here is not intended to speak in a comprehensive manner about West African Muslims in Berlin. Based on a so far limited fieldwork, I wanted to show how these young people have organized themselves in the context of the so-called refugee crisis. Those I have encountered in Berlin have regularly brought up their experience of migrating to Libya for job opportunities, and once they have been exposed to the civil war to Europe, though they had no plans for such a move. Political and social contingencies ushered to Europe new categories of migrants, some of whom, even before the collapse of Libya and the ensuing political chaos, have experienced migration. Many young men from Northern Niger and Mali, for example, would travel to Libya essentially for seasonal economic migration. But I have also encountered those who ended up in Libya in the search for further

Figure 9.2a and b Socializing after Eid prayer; photo by Abdoulaye Sounaye.

Islamic learning. In this context, too, migration (*fitta*) is a common practice that shapes the training and the reputation of the young Muslim scholar. As Heiss (2015) demonstrates, for example, migration is part of becoming a man in many Muslim contexts in Africa. It is inextricably linked to social mobility and therefore constitutes one important dimension in youth's aspirations to make a good living and "reussir,"²¹ as many would put in French.

From Mosques to Umma

In the process of making a place of their own, my interlocutors both experience and participate in the Umma, expanding the diversity of the Muslim groups and communities in Berlin, as their participation in the FAM, Omar Mosque, and search for ritual space in general show. They have evoked this concept in various conversations, emphasizing their desire to fit in and their expectations of solidarity, especially from fellow Muslims. However, their rethinking of the Umma beyond these expectations of a free and welcoming entity illustrates the ways in which they reconceptualize not only their being Muslims but also the Umma as a concept of global Muslim community. Expectations to be welcomed could be natural for these subjects who have taken for granted the reality of the Umma. Both political and religious, and at times appropriated and mobilized for group solidarity or to counter policies and ideologies portrayed as anti-Islamic or anti-Muslim, the Umma is also in many contexts experienced as a disappointing reality. In fact, many have expressed similar feelings as they reflect and narrate their experiences of "abuse and mistreatment in Libya" (Mo 2018).

While the FAM could be read as a critique of the Umma and how it fails to materialize effectively at least in the way my interlocutors expected it, the initiative could also be understood as a move to show another face of the Umma and being Muslim, especially in displacement situation. The same could be said about the Africanness or blackness of churches where religion gets entangled with nationality or ethnicity, illustrating the ways in which other identity markers provide foundation for religion. The now all too familiar concepts of African Islam (Østebø 2015; Rosander and Westerlund 1997; Monteil 1964), African Christianity (Wilhite 2017; Klinken 2013; Kalu 2007; Gifford 1998), European Islam (Buturovic 2006; Nielsen 1999), or even German Islam (Özyürek 2014; Luis 2018) are indications of those connections, but also of the significance of religion and religiosity in minority, refugee, migration, or diaspora contexts. At this juncture, it is important to note that these concepts have also been

problematic, especially when African Christianity and African Islam have been used with a derogatory meaning, pointing to the “impurity” and the “syncretism” of their practices. In my conversations in Berlin, I have also come across views on German Islam, especially when the concept is used to promote culturally differentiated and law-abiding Muslim practices in Germany, as opposed to a Jihadi Islam which is primarily portrayed as intolerant and violent and for that matter, un-German, so to speak.

Muslim migrants and refugees from West Africa have several opportunities to pray, perform rituals and celebrate festivals. They feel unwelcome in many mosques. FAM is in part a response to this experience. But FAM helps them also to find a proper ritual space and a social space to deal with vulnerability, marginalization, and discrimination in a context where migration, Africa and young men prompt anxieties across Europe. And as one may see, these anxieties have also resulted in a discourse that emphasizes the need to protect Europe and keep it undisturbed. Thus, the religion of the migrant can be an issue, especially in light of the narratives and claims of Islamization and Africanization of Europe which make social inscription even more challenging in the face of the juridical state and its power structures. This is part of the predicaments of my interlocutors.

What lies then behind such an idea of the Umma? What implications do these experiences of disappointment have for the ways of being Muslim and finding *one's space*? What would be the impact of my interlocutors, twice a minority—Muslims and blacks—on the ways of being Muslim in Berlin? These are key questions that arise from the discussion presented in this chapter. But it suffices here to note how displacement and encounter inspire (re)appropriations of religion and, at the same time, deconstruct and relativize key concepts such as the Umma. Obviously, these (re)appropriations prove an opportunity to fuel this concept.

The idea of being part of and constituting a collective is central to my interlocutors. Yet, West Africans are not a homogenous group. Not only are they diverse, but they have also as of late begun to experience frictions. I have witnessed among my interlocutors several exchanges that remind of the classical Sufi-Salafi argument over the Mawlid, the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, or whether one should pray with the arms along the body or crossed over the chest, two contentious issues among Muslim in West Africa. Furthermore, an argument arose a year ago over the funding of some activities and the idea of another organization.

A key question to ask, however, is how the next steps of their being in Berlin will shape the spaces they *make* and the practices they now promote. What other

social inscriptions will emerge as they get used to Berlin, acquire legal residence, develop relationships beyond their regions, and get out of their status of “sans papiers”? What alternative placemaking should one expect? Which significance would ritual space and practice carry or maintain?

Conclusion

While it is manifest that religiosity has become a factor in the social inscription of refugees and migrants from West Africa in Berlin, to unpack the extent to which this condition is specific to Muslims, analyzing at least the case of their Christian counterparts is needed. In fact, the need for social inscription in Berlin is by no means exclusive to Muslims. On the contrary, as Nieswand (2010) shows, Charismatic Christians from West Africa have also used this strategy to find space and congregate in Berlin. Though they transit via German-dominated churches, in the end, they form their Bible reading groups and even churches that place them in a vibrant religious landscape and give an African touch to religion similar to that of the FAM.

As I have shown, the search for a ritual space is intricately linked to that of a social space. It is part of the process of self-representation and constituting a collective which in turn is also related to having one's own space. It is not surprising that religion becomes a powerful resource and a modality of asserting one's agency in one's own life. Thus, focusing on religion is not only relevant but necessary to understand and problematize the refugee/migration condition. The search for a space among migrants and refugees in Berlin in the last five years has demonstrated just that. In the case of my interlocutors, it is even part of being African with all the rethinking and renegotiation of one's own religiosity and the political implications this might have.

The case I contribute to the broader conversation on religion, refugees and migration has sought to bring to light the experience of being Muslim of many young West Africans as they struggle to inscribe themselves in the Berlin religious, social, and political landscape. Starting with the idea of analyzing how these migrants and refugees find ritual space, I also show that the ritual, the social and the political are all entangled. Finding a space and making a place could be highly political as one seeks to escape marginalization and vulnerability. Grouping, community organizing and acquiring visibility, as two other “African” initiatives in Berlin have demonstrated,²² are effective strategies to make one's own place in Berlin.

As noted earlier, what my interlocutors have referred to as the Turkish model, has inspired, for example, the *Afrikanischer Muslimkreis* (AMK, African Muslim Circle), an organization that provides social services and raises awareness against discrimination while it contributes to educational programs in Cameroon. Alarmed by the increasing level of intolerance vis-à-vis refugees and migrants from African background, and the growing number of discrimination cases against sub-Saharan Africans, AMK has engaged in sensitizing and offering a space for socialization to many from sub-Saharan Africa. Similar to the FAM, but trying to appeal to more secular constituencies, AMK builds on Islam to make a space for sub-Saharan Africans.

A further analysis could investigate how Africa, Africanity, or Africanness get performed in this process. What calls, claims and political agendas lie behind the designation FAM? What baggage does this intervention in a Muslim minority context carry? What parallels could we draw with other and similar initiatives that sought to offer a space for migrants and refugees in a context where new categories such as European Islam or German Islam make their way into not only political but also academic arenas. How would these categories relate to those we use and which have sedimented in our renderings of religion and religiosity?

In the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis of 2014–15, Berlin became a vibrant arena for young migrants and refugees from West Africa who found in religiosity a way to claim space in the city. It is important to note how in this case religion has mediated the agency of these young people and helped them set the conditions for reconstructing their lives, at the same time that they faced the challenges of socioeconomic integration, legal status, and debasing stereotypes. Their initiatives demonstrate the significance of religiosity for the whole experience of being displaced, but also for the attempts at reconstructing one's life. The process has opened new horizons for being Muslim, West African, and migrant/refugee in Berlin; it has also raised new concerns and prompted new debates.