



## Education, religious trust, and ethnicity: The case of Senegal

Michelle Kuenzi

Department of Political Science, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 89154, United States



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### ABSTRACT

Although the relationship between religious attachment and education has received much attention, few studies have examined it in the African context. Using data from a survey of 1,484 rural Senegalese citizens and Afrobarometer survey data, this article examines the relationship between different types of education (adult literacy education, Koranic education and formal education), ethnicity, and trust in religious leaders and institutions in the West African and overwhelmingly Muslim setting of Senegal. The results indicate that adult literacy education (ALE) generally has a negative effect on religious trust while the effects of formal education and Koranic education appear more variable. Ethnicity is also strongly linked to religious trust and appears to mediate the effects of education on religious trust.

### 1. Introduction

The nexus of religion and politics has gained salience in global politics in the post-Cold War era. Although some believe religion is a disappearing phenomenon, religion has a strong influence on political and social life in many parts of the world. This is especially true for the citizenries of African countries where religious identities can serve as the bases for social conflict or cohesion. Religious identities can interact with ethnic cleavages to either reinforce these cleavages or diminish their significance. For example, the Nigerian government reported that ethno religious conflict resulted in the deaths of over 50,000 Nigerians in only three years after its most recent transition to multiparty politics in 1999 (“Nigerian clashes: ‘50,000 killed,’” 2004), and the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram based mostly in northern Nigeria has been responsible for an estimated 20,000 additional deaths since that time. In contrast, the Islamic Sufi orders are thought to have contributed significantly to Senegal’s peace and stability (see, e.g., Diouf, 2013; Villalón, 1995). The leaders of these Sufi brotherhoods, known as marabouts<sup>1</sup>, have considerable social and political power (e.g., see Cruise O’Brien, 1975; Diouf, 2013; Gifford, 2016). Sufism has been viewed as a shield against religious extremism in West Africa and the Sahel (Diouf, 2013; Slayton, 2015).

Although Sufism is practiced throughout the world, it is finding itself in competition with more fundamentalist interpretations of Islam that Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia promulgate through the financial support of schools and other types of charity. The influence of Saudi Arabia can be seen in such far-flung locations as Central Asia, Bosnia and China (Prokop, 2003, 85). Fundamentalist interpretations of

Islam have spread across sub-Saharan Africa through the efforts of different Arab states that have provided education and other social services governments have failed to supply (Englebert and Dunn, 2013, 100). In particular, the Sahel has attracted the attention of the U.S. and those in the international community more broadly in part because it is “often seen as a laboratory for extremists and terrorists” (Brossier, 2017, 158). Many global jihadist groups have infiltrated politics in this region, and numerous local West African jihadist groups have emerged on the scene and have made a connection with these global jihadist networks. For example, Islamist terrorist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS operate in Niger (Searcey and Schmitt, 2017). In 2012, a large swathe of Mali came to be under the control of several Islamist terrorist groups including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Walther and Christophoulos, 2015, 497).

Dowd and Raleigh (2013, 501) argue against the notion that the various violent Islamist groups in the region all adhere to the same jihadist ideology or can be seen as elements of one jihadist network such as Al-Qaeda. They point out that these groups develop out of local circumstances, are influenced by the context in which they operate and often have local as opposed to global goals (498). Similarly, Diallo (2017) describes how armed jihadist groups have exploited legitimate local grievances and frustrations in Mali to attract members. While this may be the case, these local Islamist groups’ operations and aspirations have frequently expanded because of their connection to global jihadist groups. As Weeraratne (2017) notes, the financial and operational support and training the transnational jihadist groups have provided Boko Haram have led to a massive expansion in Boko Haram’s operations (623).

E-mail address: [michele.kuenzi@unlv.edu](mailto:michele.kuenzi@unlv.edu).

<sup>1</sup> A marabout is a Sufi spiritual leader or shaykh.

Despite the salience of religion and its link to armed conflict in West Africa, we know little about the forces that influence West Africans' religious beliefs and attitudes. Education has long been thought to influence religious beliefs, but most of the empirical studies on the relationship between education and religious beliefs have been conducted in the West, largely in the United States. Moreover, these studies have produced mixed results. In addition, the author knows of no empirical studies on how adult literacy education (ALE)<sup>2</sup> or traditional Koranic education influence religious attitudes despite their prevalence in West Africa. In fact, Koranic education in West Africa has been omitted from most empirical studies of education (Goensch, 2016, 167). The author seeks to help fill the gap in the literature by examining the relationship between different types of education, ethnicity, and trust in religious leaders and institutions in the West African and overwhelmingly Muslim setting of Senegal. Within the purview of the study are three types of education: ALE, Koranic education and formal education. How do ALE, Koranic education and formal education affect trust in religious authorities, if at all? Do these three different types of education influence religious trust in a similar manner? Does ethnic identity affect the relationship between education and religious trust? In order to answer these questions, the results of a survey involving a probability sample of 1484 Senegalese citizens are presented<sup>3</sup> and compared with the results of Afrobarometer (AB) survey data.<sup>4</sup>

This study is important not only because of the concern about the spread of religious extremism and jihadists groups, but also because large amounts of donor aid have been channeled to education in developing countries (Heyneman and Lee, 2016), particularly in Africa, which is the most aided region of the world. Understanding how effective the education supported by donor aid is in transforming behaviors and beliefs is thus of great importance. For example, adult literacy programs have spread around the world and are very prominent in Africa. If ALE affects individuals' attitudes and behaviors, national governments and donors may judge such programs worthy of support. Thus, this study is likely to be of interest to international actors and donors, national governments, and education practitioners.

## 2. Theoretical foundations

According to modernization theory, religion's social and political influence wanes with modernity. That is, with modernization, religion, as well as ethnic identity, become relics of the past. The forces of modernity, such as industrialization, urbanization, and education, all work together to undermine the power of religious institutions, affiliations, and beliefs and therefore give rise to secularism. (See Fox, 2002 for a review of the arguments in support of and in contradiction to the "modernization and secularization theses.") Some scholars emphasize the individual level changes that occur with modernization and contend that, as people adopt more cosmopolitan identities, traditional identities will erode. According to Inkeles (1969), individual level modernity is associated with greater independence from traditional authorities, such as religious figures, and "a belief in the efficacy of science and medicine" (210). Indeed, science is thought to supplant religion as a framework for understanding the world. Education is therefore one of the key variables thought to drive secularization. As Halman and Draulans (2006) explain, "Education means increasing cognitive skills, developing a more critical attitude toward authority,

and placing an increasing emphasis on personal autonomy and individual judgment, and, consequently, results in lower levels of religiosity" (270).

How, in fact, does education affect religious attachments? Despite the substantial attention given to the relationship between education and secularization, there is still a high level of discord in the literature. A number of studies support the contention that education depresses religiosity. The results of Pollack's (2008) study of church adherence and religiosity in Europe support the secularization theory on both a micro and macro level (181). On a micro level, he finds that both the "modernity" variables income and education are negatively associated with indicators of religiosity (179). Arias-Vazquez (2012) concludes that education unambiguously has a negative effect on religiosity in the United States. Based on a study using European Values Study data for 14 European countries, Mocan and Pogorelova (2017) find that education had a consistent negative influence on religiosity. In contrast, Franck and Iannaccone (2014) fail to find a relationship between educational attainment and church attendance and some studies actually find that education tends to boost levels of religiosity (e.g., McCleary and Barro, 2006).

Some studies suggest that the relationship between education and religiosity is mediated by the context or similarly that this relationship can vary across different social groups, which would help explain the contradictory findings reported in the literature. For example, although Schwadel (2015), in his study of 39 countries, finds that higher education has a negative effect on the level of religiosity at the aggregate level, he also finds that the influence of higher education on religiosity varies across countries (403). In some countries, higher education is associated with higher levels of religiosity (Schwadel, 2015, 416). Cesur and Mocan's (2018) recently published study based on a survey conducted in Turkey indicates that educational achievement mitigated the likelihood women would identify as religious, cover their head, or support Islamic parties at the polls (1). These results, however, are nearly completely confined to urban areas. Indeed, education does not have significant effects on these behaviors among women in rural areas (26). This finding supports the idea that context mediates the relationship between education and religiosity. Hungerman (2014) also finds that education has a different effect on Protestants' religiosity than it does on Catholics' religiosity in Canada. Finally, in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, Gibson (2003) finds that the relationship between education and democratic attitudes differs across racial and ethnic groups in South Africa.

Does religious education of different forms tend to heighten levels of religiosity? Interestingly, although one may think religious education would obviously boost religiosity, the effect of religious education on individuals' levels of religiosity have also produced mixed results. Some studies point to a household's level of religiosity as largely determining an individual's religiosity as opposed to exposure to religious education (e.g., see Hill, 2011). In contrast, Barrett et al. (2007) find that the religious culture of a school has a strong effect on individuals' levels of religiosity. There have been no studies on the relationship between traditional Koranic education and religiosity or religious trust. Most of the studies of Madrasahs focus on whether they foster religious extremism and terrorism, particularly in the context of Pakistan. Bano and Ferra's (2018) recent study, however, examines the influence of attending Madrasahs on religiosity in Pakistan. Bano and Ferra (2018) find that once one takes into account the level of parental education, attending a Madrasah is not associated with religiosity.

Clearly, the nature of the relationship between education and religious attachments requires more examination, particularly in non-Western settings. Senegal is an ideal country in which to examine this relationship. The marabouts' substantial political power is a salient feature of Senegalese politics. The *ndigels* or commands marabouts gave their faithful on how to vote exemplified this power in the past. Senegalese are keenly aware of the power of the Sufi brotherhoods. When asked whether the brotherhoods had no, a little or much

<sup>2</sup> In this study, ALE refers to the programs intended to impart basic literacy and numeracy skills on participants, usually adults who have been left out of formal education systems or dropouts from formal schools (a more detailed description of these programs is provided below).

<sup>3</sup> This survey will be referred to as the ALE survey.

<sup>4</sup> The Afrobarometer surveys are public opinion surveys that focus on political and economic attitudes. They are conducted in over 35 African countries. National, representative samples are employed. For more information, please see <http://www.afrobarometer.org/>.

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