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Improving Inter-Communal Relations in Joal-Fadiouth

Insights from a Study on the Resting Places of the Dead

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Summary

The settlements of Joal and Fadiouth in Senegal's Thies region enjoy levels of intercommunal harmony that many societies in Senegal and the rest of Africa will envy. Unfortunately, these localities are also beginning to display tensions over the questions of origins and faith that occur in many African countries. This policy brief sheds light on why life in Joal-Fadiouth is so harmonious and also suggests ways in which some of the burgeoning tensions can be handled to sustain social peace. Lessons from these cases can be useful for peace practitioners in other communities that face intercommunal tensions.

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Introduction

In February 2016, CODESRIA commenced a project to study intercommunal relations by looking at the places where people of different faiths are buried in the Commune of Joal-Fadiouth in Senegal. This study continues CODESRIA's history of work on inter-communal relations in Africa that has covered issues such as inter-ethnic and inter-faith conflicts, electoral disputes and land conflicts. The Nagel Institute's programme on *Religious Innovation and Competition: Their Impact in Contemporary Africa*¹, which supports this project, has come at a time when the place of faith in social life in Africa is on the top of the agenda.

This policy brief shares some insights into intercommunal relations in Joal-Fadiouth and offers some recommendations on how to improve them. It is based on a study of burial patterns that involved a survey of 600 people, semi-structured interviews with 65 people, a participatory cartography exercise and visits to many important sites in Joal and Fadiouth. The Brief responds to a desire voiced by many people in the Commune to access the results of the study. For instance, the Mayor of the

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The Commune of Joal-Fadiouth was established in 1966 and Fadiouth, Joal and Ngazobil are its three localities. The Commune, which is located in Thies Region, is unique in that it is a place with a strong Catholic presence in a country where over 90 per cent of the population is Muslim. The population of Joal-Fadiouth was said to be around 50,000 in 2016. The mainland settlement of Joal is the most populated with over 42,000 inhabitants, while the island of Fadiouth is said to be populated by around 5000. Ngazobil is the least populated locality in the Commune. The study on which this brief is based focused only on the localities of Joal and Fadiouth.

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Oases of Peace and Tolerance

The people of Joal and Fadiouth pride themselves on the peaceful co-existence of various communities in their settlements. Christians and Muslims as well as

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'autochthones' and 'strangers' all live harmoniously in a community where violent inter-communal conflict and even tension is largely unheard of. In this sense, Joal and Fadiouth largely mirror the rest of Senegal, which has escaped many of the violent intercommunal conflicts that have plagued many other countries in

Africa, including Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya and Central African Republic.

There is a general tendency in the two communities to accept and interact with other people regardless of their faith. Thus 97 per cent of respondents from the two settlements believe that people of different faiths should live together in each neighbourhood, while 99 per cent contend that people of different faiths should be able to interact in the same places of leisure. Also, 99 per cent believes that people of different faiths should be able to work in the same establishments. Views on marriages between people of different faiths show a chasm between the views of Muslims and Christians. While 80 per cent of Christians approved of such marriages, only 65 per cent of

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Muslims approve of them. During in-depth interviews many Muslims tended to insist on the Christian converting to Islam if such marriages were to happen.

On the whole, people in Joal and Fadiouth seem to be acutely aware of the importance of tolerance and pride themselves on the level of tolerance in their communities. The proclamation of many interviewees is: 'In other places in Senegal, people have inter-religious dialogue once in a while on TV and the radio. In Joal-Fadiouth, we live inter-religious dialogue on a daily basis.' Christians and Muslims interact in ways that may not always make sense to Senegalese in other parts of the country. Fadiouth's cemetery where people of all faiths are buried, in a country where most localities have separate cemeteries for Christians and Muslims, is one example of this difference.



It is not only inter-faith differences that seem to have done little to sour inter-communal relations in Joal-Fadiouth. Joal has, over the centuries, been a destination of migrants from various parts of Europe (Portugal, Holland, France, etc.), Asia (Lebanon, Syria, etc.) West Africa and the rest of Senegal because of its location, port and abundant aquatic resources. This has led to an extension of the town beyond the old neighbourhoods of Ndiong, Mbelegnieme, Bourdiouham, and Ndoubab. Just like relations between faith communities, relations between 'indigenes' and 'strangers' have been largely peaceful over the centuries.

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Why are Inter-communal Relations so Good?

To explain the very healthy interactions between Christians and Muslims in Fadiouth, people in the community almost always make recourse to blood relations. In Fadiouth and in the traditional neighbourhoods of Joal, it is almost impossible to find a family that does not have both Muslim and Christian members. In this sense, they are very different from the new neighbourhoods of Joal that are populated by migrants, which are heavily Muslim and where most people know of no Christian in their extended family. In Fadiouth and the traditional neighbourhoods of Joal, people inevitably refer to siblings, parents, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents of a faith different from theirs. 'If we live in peace here it is because we belong to the same families and we see each other as family members first before we think about our religious affiliations.'

This reference to shared blood lines, however, tends to underestimate the amount of constant work that people do to maintain good relations in these communities. On a routine basis Christians and Muslims make gestures that reinforce the idea of oneness. For example, in Fadiouth, the rebuilding of the church in 1981 and 2000 involved both Muslims and Christians just as the rebuilding of the mosque in Fadiouth in July 2016 was an occasion for both Muslims and Christians to ferry cement across the bridge to the island.

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Healthy inter-communal relations in Joal-Fadiouth are also partly due to the fact that two important differences – religion and origins – that separate members of these communities tend not to overlap. Instead they cut across each other. Among the ‘autochthones’, one finds both Muslims and Christians and it is the same among the ‘strangers,’ even if less so. So while ‘Odile Diouf’ and ‘Pierre Sene’ may confront each other as ‘stranger’ and ‘autochthone,’ they may work together as members of the choir of *Notre Dame de la Purification* of Joal. Similarly, while ‘Fatou Ndoye’ and ‘Aida Sarr’ may confront each other as ‘stranger’ and ‘autochthone’ they may meet at a thiant (prayer and praise-singing event) as devout members of the Sufi Mouride Brotherhood and even board the same bus for the pilgrimage to Touba. Also, ‘Mbissine Ndiaye’ (Catholic) and ‘Awa Thiakane’ (Muslim) who may each espouse their faith vociferously may find each other as ‘autochthones’ living in the same neighbourhood. Thus, one’s opponents in one context are one’s allies in another. Total enemies become difficult to construct. It is easier for people to reach out to each other and resolve the little conflicts that inevitably arise when humans live in communities.

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Undergirding all of this is the system of maternal lineages among the Serer that cuts across differences based on faith and origins. Among the maternal lineages in Joal-Fadiouth are *Yokam, Jaxanoora, Fata Fata, Soos, Fedjor, Simala, Siwana, Jane-Jane and Labor*. Many ceremonies around important events, including marriages, births and deaths, are occasions for these maternal lineages to take centre-stage. Members of each lineage, will participate in these events as one group with no regard to the faith of individuals. Because these lineages span Serer communities in other areas of Senegal, they also represent ways of linking ‘strangers’ to ‘autochthones.’ A member of the *Jaxanoora* lineage who migrates to Joal from the Saloum islands can seek to create links with people in the community by looking for members of her lineage there. Even a non-Serere who settles in Joal-Fadiouth can be integrated into the lineage of their host.

Growing Challenges and Recommendations

Despite the rather good inter-communal relations in Fadiouth and Joal there are some challenges that require attention if the social peace and the atmosphere of tolerance are to be maintained over the long run.

'Autochthones' and 'Strangers' in Joal-Fadiouth

The victory of the current Mayor, Boucar Diouf, in the elections of 2013 is spoken of by many in Joal and Fadiouth as the first time a 'non-autochthone' had taken over the ultimate office in the Commune. However, before Boucar Diouf, there was the first mayor of Joal-Fadiouth, Jean Collins, who was a French expatriate. But Boucar Diouf had beaten an incumbent who was an 'autochthone' in multi-party democratic elections largely because of support from the 'stranger'-dominated new neighbourhoods of Joal. The 'strangers' had, for the first time lined up behind a candidate of their own, and trounced opposition from the 'autochthones.' The wounds were still raw in 2016 when the Commune celebrated its 50th anniversary. Joal's old neighbourhoods refrained from participating in the celebrations.

Conflicts between 'strangers' and 'indigenes' and the dangerous discourse of 'autochthony,' which accompanies them, are the causes of terrible violence in Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and the Central African Republic, among other places. Some in Joal and Fadiouth dismiss the issue as a game of politicians that is

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irrelevant to ordinary people. It is important to note, though, that it was this 'game of politicians' that sparked off terrible violence in countries like Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Like in many areas of Africa, parties to this conflict in Joal-Fadiouth often speak past each other. On the one hand, the 'indigenes' refer to traditional customs that uphold the first settler as the owner of all lands, chief adjudicator and political leader. Settlers in Joal are said to be flouting these customs by using their numbers to usurp power. On the other hand, the 'strangers' focus on the Senegalese constitution and laws that make all Senegalese equal before the law. These laws guarantee the rights of Senegalese to live where they wish in the national territory and to vote and seek office without regard to issues of 'autochthony.' For them, the 'autochthones' are simply being xenophobic bad losers.

The 'indigenes' of Joal-Fadiouth are by no means naturally xenophobic people. For centuries they have interacted and mixed intensely with people from Europe, Asia and other parts of West Africa and Senegal. As far back as the 1600s, Joal had a thriving Luso-African community, which was gradually assimilated by the Serer population. Migrants that arrived as lately as the 1960 and 1970s attest to their hospitality.

Unfortunately, the integration of later migrants has been a bigger challenge. New neighbourhoods like Santhie II, Cité Darou Salam and Cite Lycee are distant from the old neighbourhoods of

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Ndiong, Mbelegnieme, Ndoubab, Bourdioham and Afdaye-Diamaguene. Most of the economic activities that attract migrants to Joal, which centre on marine resources, are now concentrated in these new zones. The fact that many new migrants reside in these areas mean that many of them hardly ever go to the old neighbourhoods. I met a lady in Cité Darou Salam who had stayed in Joal for 11 years and did not know of the neighbourhood of Ndiong. The limited participation of people in the old neighborhoods in the fish-dominated economy of the town means that there are not many opportunities for workplace interactions and much frustration with 'the domination of the economy by strangers.'

Bringing these two segments of Joal together requires each community to recognize the concerns of the other and for influential actors to engage in pact-making. This has to commence with the recognition of the rights of 'strangers' to live, vote in and contest power in the area as enshrined in Senegalese law. The 'strangers' also need to understand the sentiments of ownership that the 'indigenes' have toward Joal. After-all many of these migrants, while laying claims to 'also [being] autochthones' of Joal often want to be buried 'back home' in their places of origin, maintain property and land rights in those places and still have a sense of ownership toward these places. They have to appreciate that the people of Joal-Fadiouth feel the same way about the Commune.

There is a clear need for conversations to reconcile Senegalese law with the customary rights of first settlers that will allow various segments of society in Joal-Fadiouth to participate in and benefit from the exercise of power. The pact resulting from such a conversation will follow an earlier pact in the Commune that required the office of the mayor to be held alternately by people from Joal and Fadiouth with each leader serving no more than two terms. That short-lived pact made no mention of Ngazobil and excluded the migrants in the area.



Muslims and Christians in Fadiouth

The establishment of a Catholic mission in Fadiouth in 1879 led to an intense proselytisation that was to transform the island into one that was almost 100 per cent Catholic by the mid-1900s. It went on to become one of the biggest contributors of Catholic priests, sisters and brothers to the church in Senegal. But there is a long history of a Muslim presence in Fadiouth that has grown with time with a rough estimate in 2016 of 15 per cent of the resident population being Muslim. The rise in the proportion of the Muslim population of Fadiouth is one that is on the minds of many on the island. The Muslims are very proud of it. The Catholics look at it with some concern. On both sides, the core identity of Fadiouth is said to be at stake.

Current demographic trends in Fadiouth and the fact that Senegal is over 90 per cent Muslim suggest that the Muslim proportion of the island will continue to grow and could someday even surpass the Christian one. As with many issues that stand to undermine social cohesion in Fadiouth, these issues tend to not

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be spoken about in public. But a deliberate conversation that reflects on the place of religion in public life in Fadiouth needs to take place.

The Catholic Church achieved great success in recreating Fadiouth as a Catholic island. Each neighbourhood

has a prominently displayed patron saint with the patron saint of Ndia-Ndiaye, dominating the intersection of the two most important roads on the island. The place where the sacred baobab tree that is of great traditional religious significance to the village stands was made the site of the 'Calvaire de Fadiouth' with an elaborate structure. The village's famous 'mixed cemetery' is dominated by a massive cross. The question that naturally follows is: How can such a space dominated by Catholic symbolism be comfortably inhabited in the future by a population that has a more substantial Muslim component?

Conversions and Mixed Marriages

Anxiety over the size of each religious community is seen most clearly in the constant discussion of conversions in Joal-Fadiouth. People of each faith often

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suspect that others are trying to poach their members. Underhand means of doing this are said to include: 'targeting our daughters for marriage just so they can convert them,' luring people with economic benefits, including business

opportunities, money and conditional job offers, and raising orphans in faiths other than those of their fathers. The right of people to choose and change their faith seems to be subjugated to interpretations of religious doctrine that stress the importance of maintaining the size of the flock. People still use the word 'apostasy' that has a very dangerous history and is punished by the death penalty in some countries even today.

The issue of conversions is intimately linked with the question of mixed marriages. Most marriages involving people of different faiths often end up with the conversion of the woman to the faith of her spouse. People say that 'women have no religion and belong to the religion of their husbands.' Those couples who choose to keep separate faiths often have very difficult lives. The men are ridiculed as weak by their relatives and friends for not being able to force their wives to convert. The women face pressure from their in-laws to convert. This is even as they face pressures 'not to give in' from members of their own faith. Some women end up diminishing the extent to which they practice their religion to 'avoid giving people weapons to ridicule [their] husbands.' Many of such mixed marriages eventually end up in divorce due to these pressures.

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Final Resting Places

The availability of cemeteries is important both for the living who have to bury and continue to commune with their dead and for the dead who inhabit these final resting places. It is, therefore, of concern to many that the three cemeteries in Joal and Fadiouth are all almost full. Deciding on what to do about this problem has to be informed by recognition that burial patterns in the two communities have a lot of legitimacy in the eyes of residents. Some 86 per cent of respondents in Fadiouth, regardless of their faith, are open to being buried in a cemetery where people of all faiths are buried as it is currently done in the island's Njoty cemetery. In Joal, only 20 per cent of the people, regardless of faith, are open to being buried in a cemetery used for people of all faiths.

While Fadiouthiens own land away from the island on which they can create another cemetery, it is clear that people want to continue to bury their dead

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in the existing cemetery at Njoty. They might resist the creation of a new cemetery as they have done to efforts to shift their community to other sites in the past. The best solution is to find a way of making Njoty continue to serve as the cemetery of Fadiouthiens in the future.

The ongoing work of the organisation called M'bin-Baktou to increase the lifespan of the cemetery by regulating the size and form of tombs makes Fadiouth a pioneer. As the population of Africa balloons, the living will need more land to use for development just as there will be more dead people to bury. The option of just creating another cemetery when existing cemeteries become full will not always be available to communities. Fadiouthien methods for making sure a cemetery 'never gets full' could become models for other communities in Senegal and beyond.

Recommendations

1. *The political and religious leaders in Fadiouth, Joal and Ngazobil should begin talks to create a pact that will ensure that people of all three localities, including 'indigenes' and 'strangers,' Muslims and Christians can access and benefit from political power. Particular emphasis should be placed on making sure that demographic minorities are not perpetually excluded from political power.*
2. *The extent to which a project helps unify 'strangers' and 'autochthones' in Joal should become a key criterion for evaluating all proposed development projects by Commune authorities and their development partners.*
3. *Fadiouthiens should commence discussions on the changing religious complexion of their island and the ways in which they can adjust to it. While the demographic change itself does not constitute a threat, not deliberately reflecting on how to adjust to it will likely cause problems for the community in the future.*
4. *Religious leaders should discourage the use of the term 'apostasy' in favour of the more neutral term 'conversion.' They should encourage tolerance of those who chose to convert to other faiths and women who chose to hold on to religions that are different from those of their spouses.*
5. *The ongoing effort to create two new cemeteries for Joal with one exclusively reserved for Muslims and one only for Christians is in line with the current wishes of the population. These cemeteries should be detached from each other with at least walls and a road separating them.*
6. *The work of associations like M'bin Baktou and the community of Fadiouth to make sure their cemetery 'never gets full' should receive support from the Commune of Joal-Fadiouth, the Senegalese state and external actors. This support should be regarded as an investment in innovations for more greener and sustainable communities in a continent whose population is projected to double by 2050.*



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