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## Urban Youth Cultures in West Africa

In the literature on African youth culture, 'youth' is frequently associated with social marginality, violence and HIV/AIDS, and youthful cultural expressions are portrayed as symptoms of crisis, anomie and degradation. Against this tendency, our research project will study young people as agents rather than victims of societal change by exploring their constructive and creative potential. This potential is expressed on the one hand in their appropriation and transformation of new global influences, and on the other hand in the ways they represent themselves towards the outside world. In the project two distinct forms of West African, mainly urban, youth culture will be central: ethno-cultural manifestations (Niger) and religious beliefs and practices (The Gambia). Both studies focus on new ways in which 'youth' is being conceptualized and experienced through migration, cultural performances and Islamic reform in West Africa.



Young Wodaabe dancers during their annual lineage meeting

### Tribal Culture, World Culture, Youth Culture Young Fulbe in Town

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The Fulbe Wodaabe from Central Niger represent the most nomadic pastoral population in Africa and, in some respects, the most peripheral of the various Fulbe groups. Of late, however, the Wodaabe also turn out to be the most innovative of the Fulbe – a trait which manifests itself not least in their readiness and aptitude to create novel forms of political representation and social alliances.

An important factor of change in the last twenty years has been the growing acquaintance with urban conditions, i.e., the constantly increasing significance of Wodaabe urban migration and the opportunities for communication with Europeans and Americans that go with it. Within a short space of time, individual Wodaabe managed to find themselves a place in this new, international world, to discover a new type of resources and apply themselves to its exploitation. This urban world and its contact openings has hitherto been almost exclusively reserved for Wodaabe youth.

Contrary to other Nigerien Fulbe, the Wodaabe present themselves in the current organisational endeavours not only as pastoralists, but also as a cultural phenomenon – which means as Wodaabe –, in other words they see themselves as custodians of cultural heritage. They are keen to become cultural agents and try to establish contact with western cultural centres or private promoters to organise performances and regular tours, particularly in Europe and North America.

Whereas the dances staged by the young performers originally took place during the important annual lineage meetings, that is in an exclusively Wodaabe context, and were designed to have an effect in this internal social domain only, they function now as a medium of exchange with the outside world. The project will investigate these new and predominantly urban forms of exchange in which youth act as the preservers of their culture while at the same time mediating novel ideas and cultural forms.

### Islam as Subculture

#### The Gambian Tablīgh Jamā'at Studied as a Translocal Network for Youth in West Africa

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Despite its magnitude, relatively little academic attention has been paid to the Tablīgh Jamā'at – a transnational Islamic missionary movement – particularly with regard to sub-Saharan Africa. The project focuses on the Tablīgh in The Gambia, which has become a flourishing centre of Tablīgh activities in West Africa. What is striking is that, different from South Asia where the movement originated, especially Gambian youth feel attracted to its reformist ideology. The research will explore how these young people – and female youth in particular – have appropriated the Tablīgh ideology and adapted it to the local, mostly urban, context in which they are operating.



Tablīgh women going home after having attended a female learning session

Gambian Tablīghīs are aware of belonging to a universal religious community (*umma*), which finds expression in their observance of the Prophetic traditions, the religious texts they use, and the way they dress. Nevertheless, they feel committed to a particular Islamic movement which is expressed in, for example, its gender relations. By mapping the negotiations between the locally established Islam propagated by more 'mainstream' Muslims (that is, often the older generation) and urban Tablīghīs' ideas that are derived from a South Asian setting and are influenced by various West African reformist associations, the research will contribute to the project on urban youth culture as process of translocal appropriation. Studying the Tablīgh Jamā'at from a translocal perspective is intended to provide an alternative to essentialist concepts of Islam such as the notion of a syncretic 'African Islam' or a 'fundamentalist Islam'.