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African and Not Religious: The State of Research on Sub-Saharan Religious Nones and New Scholarly Horizons

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Abstract

Sub-Saharan African societies are widely seen as highly religious. However, at least 30 million Sub-Saharan Africans identify themselves as "religious nones" and are supposedly not affiliated with any religious tradition. While research interest in religious nones has been growing in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, there is a dearth of literature on nones in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this paper, we offer an overview of this understudied subject and dwell on key challenges for studying African nones, including preconceived notions and structural oppositions. We further muse on the identity of African nones and consider differences from the characteristics established concerning Western nones. The article draws on quantitative data from across the region (primarily from Afrobarometer and Pew Research Center) and supplements them with interview data collected in Chad, Kenya, and South Africa.

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Keywords

Sub-Saharan Africa, religion, religious nones, secularism, atheism

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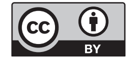

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Introduction

Since the early 2000s, scholars have been showing increasing interest in the category of "religious nones." Though its antecedents date back to the 1960s and 1970s, it was only in the new millennium that the subfield of non-religious or secular studies emerged (Cragun, 2016). Such research largely focuses on western countries – above all the United States, but also Canada and Western Europe. While these regions are the usual suspects when it comes to overrepresentation in social studies in general, studies of nones within these regions is also a response to dramatic trends of secularisation and religious atomisation that have been intensifying in Europe for well over a century, while more recently, data show erosion of religiosity in the United States as well (Inglehart, 2021).

The wealth of research both quantitative and qualitative about secularisation in the West helped scholars to construct a refined profile of Western nones. Indeed, despite misgivings about the application of a newly minted category defined through negation and largely applied from without, scholars have come to see nones as a free-standing category with its own profile characteristics – socio-demographic, political, economic, and more (Frost and Edgell, 2018). In the United States, it has been noted that, compared to the religious, nones have historically been wealthier, better educated, more male, younger, less likely to be married, more urban, whiter and politically more liberal (Kosmin and Keysar, 2006). However, in recent decades, as the number of nones rose, their profile diversified and became more like the population at large. Today, as absence of religion has become increasingly common in the United States, the only four profile characteristics that still strongly correlate with being a none are male, young, unmarried, and liberal (Strawn, 2019).

By the same logic, if the proportion of non-religious segments of populations is on the rise, as proponents of secularisation theory long argued, then religious nones in societies widely thought of as religious may be the vanguard that prefigures a paradigm shift. And yet, research on nones in non-Western contexts is limited. As Cragun (2016: 313) sums up, "While we now have a fairly clear understanding of the characteristics of the non-religious and atheists in the U.S. and in many other developed countries in the West, very little is known about these two groups outside of these national contexts." The author emphasises the need for more "research on non-religion and atheism outside of the developed West."

Arguably, nowhere is this scholarly silence starker than in Sub-Saharan Africa (henceforth SSA), often cited as the world's most religious region. Estimates regarding the number of SSA nones vary greatly, depending on research design (e.g. sample methods, framing of questions). On the higher end, a 2012 Gallup poll found 7 per cent of all Africans claiming they are "not a religious person," while on the lower end, the World Christian Encyclopedia (Johnson and Zurlo, 2020) estimates the total proportion of religious nones in SSA as under 1 per cent. The two most extensive data sources on the topic, however, are the Pew Research Center (2010) and Afrobarometer (2018), both of which assess the proportion of unaffiliated individuals across the region at

around 3.2 per cent. While these assessments all point towards a small minority percentage-wise, even conservative assessments add up to over 30 million individuals across the region with its population of over a billion people. Yet despite being substantial in absolute terms, African nones have enjoyed minimal scholarly attention. Writing on Ghana, Yirenkyi and Takyi (2010: 74–75) note that, "despite the fact that some Ghanaians self-report as unaffiliated with any religious persuasion in the country, it is unfortunate that we know very little about this group of Ghanaians. […] a review of the existing literature on religion suggests that very little has been written about this population and it has been virtually ignored in the discourse of religions in Africa." In particular, the supposed anomality of non-religiousness in SSA raises questions about African nones' specific characteristics, and the similarities between these characteristics and the established image of Western nones as primarily liberal, male, unmarried, and young.

To engage these questions, this paper is based on large-scale statistical data, including a range of surveys by the Pew and multiple Afrobarometer survey rounds (2002–2018), as well as national censuses. For the sake of illustration and to dig deeper into the findings, we also draw on our longstanding ethnographic studies on religion and society across three Sub-Saharan countries: Chad, Kenya, and South Africa.[1] This first-hand data focuses on conceptions and structural oppositions to nones as voiced by religious and political leaders. Importantly, considering the article's wide regional scope on the one hand and the versatility of profiles of African nones on the other hand, we do not present cases of individual nones. Instead, in line with this paper's position as a first step towards a new area of inquiry, we hope to inspire such explorations in the future.

In terms of structure, we begin with a general presentation of the state of research on religious nones. We then turn to present common challenges regarding the study of SSA nones, focusing in particular on popular preconceptions and structural oppositions. With this in mind, we then piece together existing data on the demographics and profile of SSA nones. We conclude by suggesting paths for future research, proposing that mixed qualitative–quantitative methods can go a long way towards clarifying the unique profiles of African nones.

A paper of this scope inevitably contains some generalisations. We recognise, for example, that some regions, such as the predominantly Muslim Sahel, have a particularly low rate of religious non-affiliation, while the predominantly Christian southern part of the continent contains substantially higher averages. While we qualify our statements as much as possible, we also believe that some generalisations are necessary for understanding regional trends. In this respect, our focus on SSA as a single region is in line with standard classifications used by major surveys.[2] Any simplistic generalisations that we may have unwittingly perpetuated should be understood as reinforcing the call for case-by-case research into this remarkably underexplored domain.

Religious Nones: A Global Perspective

Around the world, religious nones are on the rise, especially in the West (Pew Research Center, 2012a, 2015). According to data from the World Values Survey, the proportion of

the global population identifying as religious nones doubled over the last forty years, and in Europe that proportion tripled, from 10.5 per cent to 30.2 per cent, over the same period (Balazka, 2020). In the United States, where religious identity is highly unstable (Beider, 2021), the proportion of nones increased at a more rapid pace, rising from about 15 per cent to about 23 per cent of the adult population in the span of only seven years, between 2007 and 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2012a, 2015). While these figures are striking, it is not at all clear what to make of them. Before we look at SSA, let us first consider some of the main issues related to research on nones in general.

The gauging of religious nones is usually done using quantitative methods and drawing on self-identification, largely seen as both accurate and respectful towards interviewees (Zurlo and Johnson, 2016: 58). At the same time, such sources are not without problems: through survey design and laying out of categories, researchers have substantial influence on results. As nones often maintain flexible self-definition – more on that later – it is especially notable how seemingly minor details such as the order of questions, their precise wording, and the choice of one-step or two-step questioning can bias results and throw comparability into question (Hackett, 2014; Zurlo and Johnson, 2016).

Before we delve deeper into these issues, however, let us ask who, in fact, are the religious nones. Although drawn under religion, the category of nones appears to be at odds with the idea of affiliation. It is a category based on a negation – emphasis on what one is *not* – rather than affirmation – for example, of a none's identification as a secularist or humanist. Unsurprisingly, the term is used quite elastically and at times ambiguously, as an umbrella category that captures a range of orientations such as seculars, disaffiliated, atheists, agnostics, and "nothing in particular." These distinctions matter, both because people tend to be more comfortable with some categories than with others ("nothing in particular" tends to be more widely embraced than "atheists"), and because they offer different emphases. Thus, for example, Schwadel (2020) notes that atheists are more likely to be vehemently anti-religious, while those who identify as "nothing in particular" may actually be spiritual or even religious in their own way. For example, the Pew Research Center's (2012b) report "'Nones' on the Rise" explicitly suggests that, in the United States, where "nothing in particular" is the preferred option of 71 per cent of the non-affiliated, about two-thirds of those identified as nones believe in God, about a third consider themselves spiritual but not religious, and a fifth pray daily. In light of these internal tensions, does it even make sense to group such diverse groups together under the same title? Responding to a Pew study that grouped nones together with atheists, Zurlo and Johnson (2016: 60) note that, "from an operational, demographic perspective, putting individuals who believe in a higher power in the same category as those who adamantly deny the existence of a higher power is highly incongruous."

It further emerges that the distinctions around the category of nones are more fluid than they may seem at first glance. For example, when the abovementioned "'Nones' on the Rise" survey (Pew Research Center, 2012b) asked the American respondents who identified their present religion as "nothing in particular" whether they "think of themselves as Christians," about a half replied positively. One possible framework for understanding such ambiguities is through the idea of membership liminality. This concept has been

effectively argued for by Lim et al. (2010) in a study that showed that almost a third of respondents who identify as religious nones over one year claim a religious affiliation the successive year, and vice versa. The researchers further note that, despite this change in self-identification, most of these fluctuating respondents reported no significant change in religious belief or practice. The authors call these practitioners "liminal nones," "as they stand halfway in and halfway out of a religious identity" (2010: 596).

With regard to SSA, probably the two best data sources on the topic are the Pew Research Center (2010) and Afrobarometer (2018), both of which, as we noted above, estimate the proportion of unaffiliated individuals across the region as approximately 3.2 per cent. In fact, as we will see throughout this paper, actual assessments can vary greatly depending on definitions. The abovementioned 2012 Gallup poll, which found 7 per cent of Africans in their sample claiming they are "not a religious person" also identified 2 per cent as "convinced atheists." Similarly, the World Christian Encyclopedia's estimation of the total proportion of religious nones in SSA as under 1 per cent should be understood in the context of its narrow definition of nones as atheists and agnostics (Johnson and Zurlo, 2020). Commenting on Afrobarometer data, Zuckerman et al. (2016: 49) note that the rate of the unaffiliated in SSA is "negligible."

While we reject this characterisation of the phenomenon of SSA nones as negligible, we recognise that the small percentages make researching African nones methodologically challenging. Global surveys of religion such as the World Values Survey and the ISSP include, at best, a handful of African countries, and Africa-focused survey data rely on a limited sample size. As sample sizes are much smaller in surveys than in censuses, they are especially likely to misrepresent small "religious" minorities such as nones (Zurlo and Johnson, 2016: 53). The alternatives to survey data – namely, national censuses – are not without problem either, considering that, "in many countries in Africa, religious statistics are highly politicized" (Wijsen, 2007: 34n45). This politicisation should be understood in light of the common overlap between political and religious clientelism, with ethnicity often straddling both domains. This association can often be dated back to colonial times, when colonial powers and religious groups carved out their areas of operation, and continued after independence as groups fought for state power and access to resources. The ethno-political/religious alignment is exemplified by multiple conflicts, such as the years-long Chadian civil war (Buijtenhuijs, 1978; Gali Ngothé, 1985) between the Muslim-dominated north and the Christian-dominated south. In recent years, the religious component within armed conflicts in SSA has been on the rise (Basedau, 2017; Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert, 2019; Haynes, 2007).

In light of this, it is hardly surprising that, in many African contexts, religious statistics are used to advance political arguments, to perpetuate certain religio-political hegemonies, and to affirm discriminative practices. For example, in Chad, the last national census was carried out in 2009 but its data on religious adherence have still not been published out of concern for the political implications of redrafting the demographic balance between Muslims and Christians (personal communication with a Chadian politician, 2016). In Nigeria, another country divided between Christians and Muslims, Muslim leaders threatened to boycott the 2006 national census should the government keep

"religion" on the identity list, apparently out of concern that the census would identify theirs to be a minority religion (Abioje, 2015: 89).

Given these sensitivities, one should not be surprised that the topic of religious statistics in SSA is approached with trepidation. The United Nations makes no explicit recommendation regarding the collection of data on religion in national censuses, and indeed, African countries exhibit a variety of arrangements. Some countries – for example, Mali, Nigeria, Zimbabwe – have pivoted over time between registration and non-registration of religion in national censuses. Among SSA countries whose census includes a religion question, the choice of categories is in itself revealing of the government's ideas of normativity. For example, in Senegal, the 2002 census distinguished between five categories of Islam while offering no option for "traditional religion" or "no religion" (Dasre and Hertrich, 2017: 16). As shown by Duchesne et Pilon in their historical survey of over 200 censuses from African countries starting from the 1950s,[3] there is a growing trend towards evoking the question of religious affiliation: While in the 1960s only 28 per cent of African censuses asked about religion, by the 1990s this percentage reached 46 per cent and climbed further to 62 per cent in the 2000s and 2010s. The researchers also show that, out of the 105 censuses that do mention religion, the category of nones is employed in 64, a figure that has been growing steadily over time.[4]

Challenges for Researching Sub-Saharan African Nones: Preconceptions and Structural Oppositions

The centrality of religion is widely entrenched, if arguably overstated, in perceptions of African cultures. Mbiti, the author of the influential statement whereby Africans are "notoriously religious," made the case for religion's paramount social role in African cultures. His conclusion was blunt: "African peoples do not know how to exist without religion" (Mbiti, 1969: 2). Historically, such assertions drew on the resilience of traditional African religions, and might have been used as apologetic vindication of traditional African religions against their denigration by colonial agents. Writing on traditional African religions, Bâ notes that, "religion in Africa does not consist only of respecting established dogmas that pay homage to a single or multiple gods. It is the very backbone of life. It shapes all human actions be they public or private; those who call themselves nonbelievers, if they lived in Africa, would see their convictions undercut" (Bâ, 1965: 8, our translation). Such ideas continue to resonate today, and African cultures – diverse though they are – continue to be widely associated with high levels of religiosity. While this association with religiosity is at times touched by stereotypical, even atavistic views on African superstitiousness, at other times Africa is lauded as a haven of religious resilience and as the new hub for global Christianity and Islam (Jenkins, 2011; Ngom et al., 2020; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2017). A popular explanation of religion's thriving in the global South and in Africa in particular focuses on economic aspects or more broadly on what Norris and Inglehart call "existential security – that is, the feeling that survival is secure enough that it can be taken for granted" (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 4).[5]

More importantly, Mbiti and Bâ's ideas of religion as a fundamental identity component raise questions about the very suitability of the category of nones to the African case, and the category's assumption of a religious/secular divide. [6] As scholars note, the very identification of religion as a disembedded category distinct from the secular realm is anything but essential. Rather, it should be recognised as a profoundly political process that has been taking shape in post-Reformation Europe (Arnal and McCutcheon, 2012; Asad, 1993, 2003). These Western and European roots are too often overlooked, and the history of scholarship on religion is replete with false universalisation based on Western conventions. One noteable example to this effect is the problematic generalisation of "belief" and "faith" as a basic indicator of religiosity and even – since Tylor's (1871: 383) definition of religion as "belief in spiritual beings" – as a defining component of religion.[7] Conversely, the idea of religion in Africa as an essential identity element and an unquestioned fact of life frames absence of religion as an oddity, and may help to explain not only the low rates of identification with the category of nones, but also the deep resentment that many Africans feel towards it. When it comes to survey questions, such preconceived ideas about what religion is may clash with its cultural and individual significance – as a matter of faith, as a total worldview, as a system of practice, as an indispensable identity component, and so on. While surveys such as Afrobarometer and Pew try to employ careful wording and allow scholars to construct a nuanced profile of religiosity through a series of questions on beliefs and practices, the use of standard (Western) articulations and categories risks playing down the uniqueness of religion in Africa.

Despite the limitations of survey data on religion, they do facilitate comparisons across regions. Even if we take available data at face value and accept that, with nine out of ten Africans claiming that religion is "very important" in their lives and 97.2 per cent claiming to believe in God (Pew Research Center, 2010), "Africa is today the least secular continent" (Kasselstrand, 2019: 631),[8] researchers should be careful about how to interpret African religiosity. In particular, we must resist equating such religiosity with ideal-type adherence to the doctrines promulgated by religious leaders. Directly and indirectly inspired by the "lived religion" approach (Hall, 1997; McGuire, 2008), recent scholarship has shown how dynamic and mobile Africans' religious identities may be as they overflow formal institutional prescriptions and membership exclusivity (Gez et al., 2021; McIntosh, 2009; Premawardhana, 2018). This observation is especially relevant considering African societies' syncretistic approach to religion, which creatively combine traditional and Abrahamic religious systems. Explanations for such fluidity often emphasise a utilitarian stance responding to hardship and a consequential-pragmatic thirst for miracles of breakthrough (Daswani, 2015; Haynes, 2017). Such pragmatism supports a view whereby, even as religion is deeply embedded in African social identities, it might not necessarily be life's single most important identity element. For example, when asked about their self-identification, Rwandans placed religion second after nationality (Hanf and Dickow, 2009), Chadians placed it third after nationality and ethnicity (Dickow, 2005) and South Africans placed it even lower (Dickow, 2012). As Gez and his colleagues (Gez et al., 2020, 2021) have argued with regard to Kenya and Ghana, everyday

practices of religious mobility may be understood as a rejection of exclusive religious dogmatism and an affirmation of identity elements such as familial and social bonds.

The flip side of the positive conception of African societies as religious is a widespread negative perception of non-religiosity – especially in the form of atheism – as problematic and undesirable. Such a stance is not uniquely African: many in the United States and Canada – especially of the older generations – are uncomfortable with the category of religious nones (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, 2020).[9] Stronger sentiments are found across Africa, where ideas about religious nones do not simply evoke discomfort at the sight of an oddity, but are widely perceived as reflecting spiritual and moral failing. Today, such images are supported by discourse from Christian and Muslim renewal movements, such as the omnipresent Pentecostal movement, whose quest to re-enchant a secularising world presents ardent religiosity as normative and inherently African. By contrast, religious nones – often grouped together with historical churches such as Catholicism with its "lukewarm" spirituality – is presented as representing a dangerous foreign import, benignly defined as hedonism and more perniciously associated with devil worshipping. For example, a Kenyan pastor in a popular charismatic-Presbyterian church told us in a 2011 interview that,

> Generally, one of the characteristics of an African is to believe in God [...] standing from the African point of view, coming from the understanding that you cannot not believe in God as an African; then you are a strange person, a really strange person who rejects the God of the Mountain, you know, if you are a Kikuyu for instance. [...] People cannot understand why, it is not an accepted, it is not a readily understood state, how do you arrive at that kind of non-religiosity. [...] And some also see it as a condition that needs exorcism.

Such common negative images, whereby confessing to be a none exposes oneself to ridicule and ill-treatment, may well bias our understanding of the scope of the phenomenon in SSA. Writing on Ghana, Yirenkyi and Takyi (2010: 74–75) note, "in a highly religious society such as Ghana, unaffiliated people may be stigmatised, hence may be less likely to be visible as Christians and their Muslim counterparts." Indeed, in contexts where religiosity is seen as fundamentally normative, Thiessen's (2015: 97) observation that, "due to negative stigma associated with the term 'atheist' the actual atheist population could be slightly larger than survey figures suggest" may prove to be an understatement. It is hard to tell, however, just how much of an understatement it is. As the General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa told us in a 2006 interview, his impression is that many South Africans are actually nones without admitting it: "77% of South Africans are Christians, but it's mainly Christians who don't go to church. People have a distant memory of churches, they're unchurched. That is not right. If you ask them, they would call themselves Methodists or Reformed because it was the church of their parents or grandparents." To understand religious nones in SSA, our first challenge is therefore to rethink common (pre)conceptions about "the religious continent" and how these ideas are self-reinforcing, biasing and potentially blocking us from looking beyond.

A second, related challenge for studying SSA nones refers to structural resistance within African political systems, and the possibility that such resistance compromises data and taints our lenses. While most African countries have inherited, as a legacy of European colonialism, a degree of separation between religion and state, authoritarian tendencies and the great power of religion in many post-independence African countries have often tested this principle. Indeed, negative attitudes towards nones are not only a matter of personal distaste, but often manifest in the exercise of political power both formally and informally. In many countries in the region, and above all Muslim-dominated ones,[10] religious identity is a norm protected by a legal structure.

On the formal-legal side, some African countries actively discourage "religious exits" through the application of anti-apostasy and anti-blasphemy laws (Pew Research Center, 2016c) – at times even outright outlawing having no religion, as is the case in Mauritania. Variations on such regulatory religious legislation exist in all Muslim-dominated countries both south and north of the Sahara despite the fact that most former French colonies formally embraced French *laïcité* and enshrined it in their constitutions. In addition to blasphemy laws, formal apostasy laws, including the death penalty, can be found in countries with a large Muslim population, like Morocco, Egypt, Western Sahara, Somalia, Mauritania, and Nigeria.[11] At the same time, such provisions are not unique to Muslim-dominated countries, and in various explicitly secular states like Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, and Tanzania, blasphemy is punishable by fines and imprisonment for up to several years.[12] In once-secular Zambia, President Frederick Chiluba baptised the nation Christian in the 1990s (Phiri, 2003) – a line that continues to this day, for example through the country's banning of publications deemed blasphemous. Zimbabwe too considers itself a Christian nation; liberty of expression and religious belief are guaranteed in principle, but blasphemy is punishable by imprisonment.[13] It might be argued that, in many African countries, freedom *of* religion is better guarded than freedom *from* religion.

Alongside legislation related to blasphemy and apostasy, countries may maintain a de facto religious character through everyday practices and subtle forms of discrimination. Indeed, while many African countries are formally secular, historical association with a particular tradition can affect the treatment of non-dominant traditions.[14] A case in point is Chad, which inherited the principle of *laïcité* from the French, but where, in reality, religion plays a crucial political role, from the choice of national holidays to roadblocks in front of mosques during Friday prayers and a near-total halt of public activities throughout Ramadan. As the executive director of an Islamic aid association noted when we interviewed him in 2016, *laïcité* applies to everybody – even the president – but is taken to mean that everybody has a duty to practice a religion, be it Islam, Christianity, or animism. In Kenya, structural pro-religious bias was recently tested by the saga involving the group Atheists in Kenya (AIK), which for years tried to register as a legal entity despite resistance from a hostile public and government clerks.[15] When asked by a journalist why they put themselves through all this trouble rather than simply living their private lives as atheists, the society's vice-president, Francis Maende, reversed the question and pointed out that the reality on the ground is that, "they [religious people] use their beliefs to control the laws, they use their beliefs to control our morality, they use their religion to control our behaviour, they

use their beliefs to control the rest of society" (KTN News, 2019). While countries like Kenya are de jure secular, with formal allusions to God limited to "ceremonial deism" (Corbin, 2009), actual state practice is deeply infused with Christianity (Droz and Maupeu, 2013; Gez, 2021).

Incidentally, AIK is a member of Humanists International, an organisation founded in 1952 in Amsterdam and inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment and aimed to "build, support and represent the global humanist movement, defending human rights, particularly those of non-religious people, and promoting humanist values world-wide."[16] AIK is one of several recent sister organisations operating in a handful of Anglophone African countries. [17] The modest profile of these local initiatives may be understood through different conceptions of values: according to surveys and as we will see below, the values associated with the humanist movement do not capture the convictions of the majority of African nones. Still, the case of Humanists International shows a dramatic gap in perceptions of nones across continents: While in Western Europe, humanist groups have a history dating back over a hundred years and they enjoy widespread respectability and media presence (Engelke, 2015), in Africa they are not treated with a similar air of legitimacy. Members of these African sister organisations report discrimination and at times even coercion and violence, captured in the Humanists' annual *Global Freedom of Thought Report*.[18] A Pew study noted that, out of SSA's 48 countries, in 2007, there have been reported incidents of violence intended to enforce religious norms in eight countries and hostilities over questions of conversion in five countries. Ten years later, in 2017, the number of reported incidents increased dramatically, to thirty-one countries and ten countries, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2019).

We thus observe a structural climate that disincentivises Africans from exploring disbelief and cautions nones against "coming out." These sentiments can have statistical ramifications, especially when nones are grouped together with widely maligned categories such as atheists. If we consider, for example, the case of Kenya's last two national censuses, it is noteworthy that, while the 2009 census counted 922,128 (2.4 per cent) people with "no religion," by the 2019 census, which grouped "no religion" and "atheists" together, that number dropped to 755,750 (1.6 per cent). While these shifting categories may appear like a broadening that would accommodate more respondents, it is likely that the association with atheism actually deterred Kenyans who are not practitioners but who also feel uncomfortable with the maligned and seemingly anti-religious sentiments associated with atheism (see also Hackett, 2014: 401). Such a framing of categories also seems to account for the statistical divergences that we have encountered earlier: while the World Christian Encyclopedia focuses on atheists and agnostics, the Pew relies on a more open form of self-definition, resulting in a less stigmatising category that potentially also encompasses those who, to paraphrase Davie (1990), believe but do not belong.

The Profile of Sub-Saharan African Nones

Early on in this paper, we mentioned the changing characteristics associated with the common profile of nones in the United States. Initially, research noted the

overrepresentation of young, white, male, unmarried, educated, politically liberal city dwellers among the population of nones. This bolstered theories suggesting that the shift away from religion was driven by rising socio-economic status (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995). However, recent research demonstrated that, in the United States, education and socio-economic status are no longer associated with non-religion (Kosmin and Keysar, 2006; Schwadel, 2014) and that as the number of nones increases, they come to resemble the population at large, though they are still more likely to be male, young, unmarried, and politically liberal (Strawn, 2019).

Are the same observations applicable to the profile of African nones? On the one hand, the seeming rarity of African nones and the general association of secularism with Western ideas may lead us to intuitively cast them as an intellectual elite resembling the profile of the early American nones: young, educated, urban, and increasingly cosmopolitan. On the other hand, the supposed absence of an enveloping religious community, so central across SSA as a locus of socialisation, belonging, and meaning-making, may conjure a near-opposite image of socially unintegrated individuals, possibly outcasts who have been bruised by social institutions. Yet, as we show below, neither possibility is sufficiently supported by available data.

Quantitative data suggest that, while African nones are more likely than religious Africans to be young and male, they do not show a particular tendency to be unmarried nor are they distinguished by liberal or other political orientation. According to Afrobarometer, African nones do not take a more liberal position than their religious compatriots on a range of issues, including freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and women's rights. Furthermore, while secularisation theories have long held that disaffiliation is positively correlated with education especially among younger people (Hayes, 2000), in Africa at least, nones are not particularly concentrated among a rising urban middle class (Afrobarometer, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2010).[19] A little over half of all African nones (56.2 per cent) reside in rural areas, marginally higher than the proportion of Christians (53.5 per cent), but lower than that of Muslims (60.7 per cent) (Afrobarometer, 2018). Supporting the idea that African nones do not constitute a (Western-oriented) intellectual elite, the unaffiliated in SSA have about 4.6 years of schooling on average – about half-way between Christians and Muslims (Afrobarometer, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2010, 2016a).[20] Indeed, Agadjanian (2017) shows with regard to Mozambican women that disaffiliation actually correlates negatively with schooling – perhaps not a surprising finding considering religion's prominent role in educational institutions across the continent. Furthermore, unlike nones in the West (Cragun, 2016), there is no clear correlation between non-affiliation and nonmarriage in Africa (Pew Research Center, 2010b; Yirenkyi and Takyi, 2010).

In other words, the socio-demographic characteristics of African nones do not differ significantly from religious affiliates in terms of political orientation, education, urbanisation, or marital status (Afrobarometer, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2010). The only two clear-cut socio-demographic observations regarding African nones appear to be their gender and age. They conform to global gender patterns (Cragun, 2016; Edgell et al., 2017; Schnabel, 2018; Voas et al., 2013), with African men more likely to be unaffiliated

than women by a margin of 65 per cent to 35 per cent (Afrobarometer, 2018). African unaffiliated, in common with nones globally, are notably young, with SSA nones having a median age of 20 (Pew Research Center, 2012a: 27). While Africa indeed has the world's youngest population, African nones nonetheless stand out by being younger than the continental median age.

More tentative evidence seems to point towards SSA nones as often sceptical of, or disillusioned about, political institutions. Compared to other Africans, nones are less likely to be engaged politically through voting, activism, or simply showing interest in politics (Afrobarometer, 2018). This is in line with findings by Manglos and Weinreb (2013: 195), who argue that, generally speaking, religiosity in Africa "positively shapes political interest in almost all countries." Such ideas are confirmed by Sperber and Hern (2018) using data from Zambia and are in line with findings from outside the continent (e.g. Schwadel, 2020). In light of our above discussion about the intertwinement of ethno-politics and religiosity, as well as scholars' observation that religion and ethnicity are especially common conduits of political mobilisation (McCauley, 2017; Van den Berghe, 1979), a tentative hypothesis would suggest that African nones are harder to mobilise to political aims including instigation of conflicts. Still, this hypothesis requires testing using larger sample sizes. In order to place nones in relation to political power, such a study would also have to dig deeper into questions of ethnicity, class, and where applicable, former religious affiliation.

Central to understanding the identity of African nones is the question of their de facto religiosity. Even though, as we have seen, people may claim to be nones but still maintain personal religiosity and even entertain complicated relations with organised religion (Lim et al., 2010; Zurlo and Johnson, 2016), empirical studies in the United States (Kosmin and Keysar, 2006; Lim et al., 2010), Canada (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2015), and Australia (Singleton, 2015) all demonstrate that nones tend to be less religious than the affiliated. These observations seem to be applicable to the African case. A Pew study shows that around four-fifths of SSA nones believe in god, over a third attend religious services at least weekly, around half pray at least once a week, and a majority considers religion to be important in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2010). While this rate of religiosity may seem high – especially compared to Western contexts – it is substantially lower than the rates of belief and observance found among African Christians and Muslims, as well as among followers of traditional African religions.

With regard to the latter point, we may wonder to what extent might African nones in fact be followers of traditional African religions. Some scholars consider the two categories as largely overlapping. Zurlo and Johnson (2016: 70) argue that, "in Africa, the unaffiliated religious are mainly tribal religionists," and propose that, "followers of tribal religions in Africa often say that they have "no religion" because they are thinking in terms of "world religions" and that in fact many of them practice traditional, tribal or animist religions" (Zurlo and Johnson, 2016: 67). We certainly agree with the authors that, over long processes of delegitimisation and demonisation led by agents of Christianity and Islam, many followers of traditional African religions have come to internalise their traditions as lesser religions or even as no religion at all. However, the

equation of African nones with traditionalists seems problematic: According to the Pew Research Center (2010), nones score an average of approximately fifty percentage points lower than followers of traditional, tribal or animist religions on a range of measures of traditional religious practice, such as owning traditional African sacred objects and participating in traditional ceremonies to honour ancestors. Although relative to Christians, nones tend to be more engaged in traditional religious rituals, the gap between nones and Muslims is often narrow, and in fact, Muslims are actually more likely than nones to seek the help of traditional healers (Pew Research Center, 2010). Furthermore, according to Afrobarometer, the unaffiliated exhibit lower levels of trust in traditional leaders than either Christians or Muslims (Afrobarometer, 2018). It should be made clear that both the Pew and Afrobarometer studies, as well as almost every African national census that we came across, allow respondents to opt for "traditional" as their (exclusive) religion. Scholars who argue that, in Africa, identifying as none is code for traditionalism would have to explain why respondents did not tick the "traditionalist" box when that option was presented to them.

As with their attitude towards traditional leaders, available data, and especially the Afrobarometer surveys, show that African nones maintain a critical stance towards religious institutions, and have low levels of trust in religious leaders. One in four nones say they do not trust religious leaders at all, compared with one in ten Christians and one in twenty Muslims. At the other end of the spectrum, 27.1 per cent of nones trust religious leaders a lot, while among Christians and Muslims the figures are 45.4 per cent and 66.0 per cent, respectively (Afrobarometer, 2018). In fact, such skepticism expands beyond the religious realm, as African nones also seem to exhibit substantially lower levels of trust in political, civil, and military institutions (Afrobarometer, 2018; McCauley and Gyimah-Boadi, 2009). This association between no religious affiliation and institutional mistrust is in line with findings elsewhere (Kasselstrand, 2019). We can hypothesise that, in many Africans' experience, such distrust may be the result of controversies such as overemphasis on prosperity teachings, religion's overinvolvement in political affairs, disapproval of fundamentalist trends, or recurring moral scandals by religious leaders who "preach water and drink wine" (Gez and Droz, 2015; Shipley, 2009). While some who have been disillusioned respond by dropping religion from their menu altogether, the negative connotations associated with being an African none mean that most maintain some relations with their religious institutions, if only nominally.

Conclusion

In an essay on religious demographics in Burkina Faso, Pilon et al. (2019) consider a 1991 national demographic study and the country's censuses of 1996 and 2006, which together make up the only nation-wide sources of data on religious affiliation. These statistical data attest to an apparent drop in the number of people claiming "no religion," from 0.9 per cent in 1991 to 0.6 per cent in 1996 and 0.4 per cent in 2006.[21] This drop surprises the authors, and they ask whether declaring oneself as having no religion meant the same thing for respondents in all studies, and whether factors such as question formulation and

the dynamic between surveyor and respondent might account for these results. They note that the simple, straightforward articulation of the question – "what is your religion" or, in the case of interviews with household heads, "what is the religion of X" – leaves the researcher with little knowledge about actual practices and beliefs. As they conclude, "under such conditions, what credit and validity can be accorded to results that divide the population by religion?" (Pilon et al., 2019: 190, our translation) before adding that the interpretation of such results must be done with great care.

The question raised by Pilon and his colleagues resonates with the tone adopted in this article. Research on nones in Africa is still in its infancy and fundamental questions still remain, such as whether religion in Africa is "ascending" (Takyi, 2017: 202; Zuckerman et al., 2016: 72),[22] plateauing,[23] or possibly eroding (McCauley and Gyimah-Boadi, 2009). In engaging such questions, scholars must be mindful of, and move beyond, the biases created by the popular myth of the "notoriously religious continent." Such problematic preconceptions, we argued, limit our perspective by perpetuating an image of nones in Africa as a "negligible" phenomenon. While our survey data show that in Africa, like in the West, nones are associated with declining personal religiosity, we should be cautious about projecting onto African nones Western experiences of secularism, however it is understood. In particular, the idea of the erosion of hegemonies of religious institutions and people's increasing agency in piecing together their "invisible religion" (Luckmann, 1970) are by now taken for granted in the West, but seem much less convincing in most African contexts, where institutional religion continues to play a key public role and faith is highly normative. The Western stereotype of nones as intellectual humanists is unsupported by existing data about Africans. The core characteristics associated with nones in the West – liberal, male, unmarried, and young – only partially mirror in the SSA case, with more research still needed. The inconclusiveness of findings may call on us to break down the blanket category of SSA nones into a diverse array of sociocultural categories, and in so doing to explore various guiding logics.[24] Such a breakdown would recognise, no doubt, Western influences and the waning power of the church in mainly elite and urban circles, but would simultaneously search for other factors for people's retreat from religion, such as experiences of socio-political marginalisation and abuses of trust.

We therefore caution against a *vicious cycle of invisibility* within and outside academia: As so little has been written on nones in Africa, the concepts and terms used are largely borrowed – a foreignness of categories that might reinforce our inability to capture what are otherwise truly local phenomena. Revisiting the category of African nones may require us to suspend basic presumptions, such as regarding membership exclusivity or regarding the fundamental division between religious and non-religious people, which is grounded in a Western binarism that is far from accepted by all, certainly within more religious societies (Beyer, 2016). To gage the true salience of nones in Africa and to understand the profile of those who identify themselves as such, we encourage researchers to design studies that balance global and regional trends with national and local belief systems and terminologies. To best achieve this, we propose supplementing survey data with in-depth profiles of individual nones, using in-person interviews and

open questions. Indeed, it seems to us that the use of mixed quantitative–qualitative methods could be especially useful for advancing the field. Such methodological combination is already demonstrated in the recent book by Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme (2020), whose research on nones in the United States and Canada synthesises data from opinion polls and national censuses with face-to-face interviews.

Designing such research may be challenging. For one thing, nones easily elude detection, not only because of the paucity of nones-specific associative organisations – as opposed to the omnipresence of churches and mosques – but also through many SSA nones' distancing from collective groups of any kind. To this we must add the fact that, in pro-religious or anti-secular contexts, where social and legal sanctions are employed against non-normative religious orientation, people may go as far as actively hiding their true convictions. While research in this area should not be taken lightly and must be handled with great care and discretion, scholars have an active role to play in the de-stigmatisation of those opting out from religion. The issue of nones in Africa can no longer be regarded as a non-issue.

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Notes

1. Fieldwork was conducted, intermittently, in Chad between 2015 and 2019, in Kenya between 2011 and 2014, and in South Africa between 2006 and 2009. For the sake of convenience, we treat all ethnographic data as gathered by all authors.
2. North Africa is largely regarded as demographically distinct, and as arguably closer to the Middle East than to SSA. Wherever data allude to the continent as a whole, we adjusted our terminology accordingly.

3. These observations are based on early results presented by Pilon, in the context of Project DEMORELAF ("*Démographie des religions en Afrique: un enjeu scientifique et politique*", 2021–2022, project directed by Véronique Duchesne and Marc Pilon, and financed by the University of Paris), during a *Journée d'étude* held in Paris on 18 December 2020.
4. In the 1960s, the category of nones was mentioned in four African censuses, in the 1970s in six, in the 1980s in six, in the 1990s in twelve, in the 2000s in twenty one, and in the 2010s that number already reached fifteen by the middle of the decade.
5. See, for example, findings from a 2009 Gallup Poll based on data from 114 countries. The study showed a significant drop in positive replies to the question "is religion an important part of your daily life?" as correlated with countries' per-capita income bracket. While in the wealthiest countries (per capita above 25,000 USD) the rate of negative reply was 52 per cent, in the lowest category (per capita 0–2,000 USD) only 5 per cent replied negatively (Crabtree, 2010).
6. Secularization has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, as the privatization of religion, as a function of rationalization, as the differentiation of secular spheres, and as the decline in personal religiosity. It is in this latter sense that we use the term here (Casanova, 1994; Berger, 1967; Wilson, 1966; Dobbelaere, 1985; Stark, 1999; Voas and Chaves, 2016).
7. Indeed, the notion of faith is vague and polysemous (Lindquist and Coleman, 2008; Pouillon, 1979; Sperber, 1982). As Needham notes, certain languages offer "no verbal concept at all which can convey exactly what may be understood by the English word 'believe'" (Needham, 1972: 37).
8. This is also the finding of a WIN-Gallup International (2012) survey. The survey, however, included only six African countries and, as Zuckerman and his colleagues argue, should be taken with a pinch of salt (see Zuckerman et al., 2016: 236).
9. Such rejection may be a remnant of a waning historical stance. In the United States in the mid-19th century, for example, not to have a religious affiliation would have amounted "to risk not only social ostracism, petty persecution and accusation of immorality but criminal proceedings as well" (Campbell, 1971: 4).
10. Indeed, rates of non-affiliation are strongly correlated with a country's proportion of Muslims. SSA countries in which over 90% of the population identify as Muslim have the lowest percentages of religious nones, while the countries with the highest rates of non-affiliation (over 10%) all have Muslim populations of less than 3% (Afrobarometer, 2018). This is consistent with global patterns (Sevinç et al., 2018) and may be due to the difficulties associated with exiting Islam (Samuri and Quraishi, 2014; Zuckerman et al., 2016: 47).
11. Sudan abolished apostasy in July 2020 (BBC News, 2020).
12. https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/countries/africa-sub-saharan/ (accessed 7 June 2021).
13. https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-eastern-africa/zimbabwe/ (accessed 7 June 2021).
14. While one might assume that religious minorities in Africa, who often suffer marginalization, might advocate for formal secularism as it would offer them greater parity, scholars propose that in countries with a dominant religious majority and relatively weak liberal and democratic tradition, the notion of secularism can actually be deployed against minority religions and contribute to their ongoing discrimination (Mahmood, 2015).

15. The case ended up before the country's High Court, which in 2018 ruled in favour of AIK (Maupeu et al., in submission).
16. https://humanists.international/about (accessed 9 December 2020).
17. The Africa-based affiliated organizations are based in their national capitals, leading us to suspect that such associative groups are not only small but also an urban phenomenon that does not reflect African nones' substantial presence outside urban centres (see below). Humanists International's website offers little information about concrete activities in Africa.
18. Also see the *International Religious Freedom Report* published by the United States' State Department (Grim and Finke, 2006).
19. In the West, such ideas about correspondence between education and loss of religiosity have been reconsidered (Schwadel, 2014).
20. In terms of formal years of education, SSA Muslims have an average 2.6 years of schooling while Christians 5.8 years (Pew Research Center, 2016b).
21. Perhaps significantly, this same period saw a rise in the number of people claiming "other religion," from 0.2% in 1991 to 0.6% in 2006.
22. An example of such a rise is found in Ghana where, according to the Health and Demographics Survey, the rate of Ghanaians who claim to be non-religious dropped from 12 per cent to 4 per cent between the late 1980s and the early 2000s (see Yirenkyi and Takyi, 2010).
23. The Afrobarometer surveys (2002–2018) report a relative stability in the proportion of Africans identifying as unaffiliated over the past two decades, while the Pew Research Center (2010) goes as far as predicting a plateauing of nones in Africa until 2060.
24. See, for example, Neubert and Stoll's application of the notion of "socio-cultural milieus" to break down a similarly vague and imported concept – the middle class – and its inherent diversity within the Kenyan context (Neubert and Stoll, 2015).

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Afrikanisch und nicht religiös? Forschungsstand und neue Blickwinkel zu Subsahara-Afrika

Zusammenfassung
Weithin gelten die Gesellschaften in Subsahara-Afrika als sehr religiös. Mindestens 30 Millionen Afrikanerinnen und Afrikaner südlich der Sahara bezeichnen sich jedoch als „nicht religiös" und fühlen sich angeblich nicht mit religiösen Traditionen verbunden. Während das Forschungsinteresse an „Nicht-Religiösen" in den Vereinigten Staaten, Kanada und Westeuropa zunimmt, gibt es kaum Literatur über sie in Subsahara-Afrika. Dieser Artikel versteht sich als Reaktion auf dieses Ungleichgewicht. Wir geben einen Überblick über dieses bislang kaum bearbeitete Thema und diskutieren die wichtigsten Herausforderungen für die zukünftige Forschung über „Nicht-Religiöse". Dabei gehen wir auch auf vorgefasste Meinungen und strukturelle Widersprüche ein. Des Weiteren analysieren wir die Identität afrikanischer „Nicht-Religiöser" sowie Unterschiede zwischen ihnen und westlichen „Nicht-Religiösen". Der Artikel ergänzt deskriptive Statistiken (in erster Linie basierend auf Daten von Afrobarometer und dem Pew Research Center) durch Interviews, die im Tschad, in Kenia und Südafrika geführt wurden.

Schlagwörter
Subsahara-Afrika, Religion, „Nicht-Religiöse", Säkularisierung, Atheismus