



Constitutive Duality: A Bourdieusian Analysis of Arab-Islamic NGO Philanthropy in Senegal

Alassane Sow^{1*} Kamali² & Imam Buchari³

¹Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, Senegal

²Institut Agama Islam Miftahul Ulum, Pamekasan, Indonesia

³Universitas Al-Amien Prenduan, Sumenep, Indonesia

Correspondence: sociosow@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the constitutive duality of Arab-Islamic NGO philanthropy in Senegal, where the same actions simultaneously fill public service gaps and reshape religious authority. While over 500 such organizations operate in Senegal, building mosques, schools, and wells, their impacts remain undertheorized beyond binary categories of aid versus interference. A multi-sited ethnographic case study was conducted over six months across Dakar, Touba, Kaolack, and Matam, employing semi-structured interviews with five key informants, participant observation, documentary analysis, and Social Network Analysis. The findings reveal that the same mosque built with Gulf funding is simultaneously framed as charity (by NGOs), regulation (by the state), ideological competition (by Sufi brotherhoods), and social mobility opportunity (by youth). Using Bourdieu's field theory, the study argues that this constitutive duality is a structural feature of Senegal's religious field in transition from doxa to heterodoxy, where colliding habitus and unequal capital produce multiple, simultaneous meanings. The study concludes that transnational Islamic philanthropy cannot be reduced to binary categories. It must be understood as a complex process where welfare and authority, complementarity and competition, cooperation and transformation are produced simultaneously. This reframing has significant policy implications, requiring nuanced regulation that distinguishes humanitarian aid from religious authority formation.

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, Senegal has witnessed the rapid growth of more than 500 Arab-Islamic NGOs operating in education, health, and community development (Guner, 2020; Leichtman, 2022). However, this transnational philanthropy does not align with the ideal of pure humanitarian aid. The presence of Arabic-speaking intellectuals, imams, Gulf philanthropists, and Turkish or Iranian networks has created ambivalent dynamics (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018).



Senegalese society is deeply shaped by strong Sufi brotherhoods (Tijaniyya and Muridiyya) and a secular state, which often contradicts the methods used by NGOs to distribute aid ([Parasher, 2012](#)). Donor states frequently use aid as soft power to expand their geopolitical influence in West Africa ([Kane, 2012](#); [Ouallet, 2019](#)).

Various studies suggest that the presence of transnational Arab-Islamic NGOs in Senegal is not understood merely as humanitarian activity, but also as part of the expansion of global Islamic networks that introduce new orientations of da'wa, education, and religious practice into the local public sphere. In a society historically shaped by Sufi brotherhoods such as the Tijaniyya and Muridiyya, the emergence of Franco-Arabic schools, mosques, hospitals, and borehole projects funded by external donors has generated ongoing negotiations between transnational models of religiosity and long-established local Islamic traditions ([Kane, 2012](#); [Ouallet, 2019](#); [Seesemann, 2010](#)). Several studies indicate that reformist groups connected to international Islamic networks often promote religious approaches that differ from local Sufi traditions, particularly regarding religious authority, ritual practice, and Islamic education ([Kane, 2012](#)). In some contexts, these developments have raised concerns among Sufi authorities about the gradual reconfiguration of local religious authority through the expansion of new institutions supported by transnational funding and networks.

At the same time, transnational Islamic philanthropy has played a significant role in providing social services in areas insufficiently served by the state. The construction of schools, health facilities, clean water infrastructure, and places of worship has often become an important source of access to education and basic services for local communities ([Renders, 2002](#)). However, some studies also show that dependence on external assistance may create new patronage relations, particularly when the distribution of resources becomes more closely tied to donor networks than to the strengthening of local capacities or state institutions ([Ouallet, 2019](#)). In Senegal, this situation produces a complex social condition: communities rely on external support to meet urgent developmental needs, while simultaneously seeking to preserve local Islamic traditions and maintain a balance between Sufi authority, society, and the secular state.

This condition demonstrates that the role of Arab-Islamic NGOs cannot be reduced either to purely humanitarian action or to ideological intervention alone ([Saggiomo, 2011](#)). The same philanthropic intervention may be perceived simultaneously as a complement to development efforts and as a source of new competition within Senegal's religious and social landscape ([Obadare & Krawczyk, 2022a](#)). In practice, transnational Islamic aid can be cooperative because it contributes to public welfare, yet transformative because it introduces

new institutional models, networks of authority, and religious orientations into local society (Obadare & Krawczyk, 2022b). This constitutive duality remains insufficiently explored in existing scholarship.

Previous studies generally fall into three main tendencies. First, studies focusing on the economic and social impacts of transnational Islamic philanthropy tend to describe developmental outcomes without explaining how the same forms of aid may generate contradictory social and political effects (Pericoli, 2025; Weiss, 2020). Second, studies examining negative consequences such as dependency or fragmentation in Islamic education often analyze these issues separately, without considering how different actors interpret aid differently (Abrori & Hadi, 2020; Muthohirin et al., 2022). Third, research on Senegal's diplomatic relations with Arab donors has primarily emphasized geopolitical and international cooperation dimensions, while paying limited attention to how local actors receive, negotiate, and adapt such aid in everyday social life (Affaya et al., 2022). As a result, few studies have integratively examined Islamic philanthropy as both a humanitarian instrument and a medium of socio-religious transformation.

This paper seeks to address that gap by analyzing the constitutive duality of Arab-Islamic NGO action in Senegal, namely, how the same intervention can simultaneously function as complementary and competitive, cooperative and transformative. The study addresses three main research questions: through what mechanisms do Arab-Islamic NGOs exercise this constitutive duality; what impacts does it have on traditional religious authority, state capacity, and beneficiary aspirations; and how do different actors, including NGO leaders, state officials, Sufi authorities, and beneficiaries, frame and negotiate the meaning of the same philanthropic intervention? The answers contribute to broader debates on postcolonial secularism, the moral economy of Islamic aid, and transnational religious networks in West Africa.

This study argues that the constitutive duality of Arab-Islamic NGOs in Senegal emerges because transnational philanthropy always carries two intertwined dimensions: a humanitarian mission and a normative religious orientation. Senegal's social structure, characterized by strong Sufi brotherhood networks, limited state regulatory capacity, and significant social needs, creates fertile ground for these two logics to operate simultaneously. Senegalese society has historically been organized around communal solidarity rooted in Sufi brotherhoods and vertical disciple-marabout relations, whereas transnational NGOs often operate through project efficiency, scalability, and developmental visibility. When external aid models are translated into local contexts, a process that may be described as the "Senegalization of aid", they not only fill gaps in

public service provision but also generate new negotiations, adaptations, and tensions within Senegal's religious and social sphere. Consequently, managing the presence of Arab-Islamic NGOs requires balancing the benefits of international assistance with the protection of religious, cultural, and political autonomy. In this sense, Senegal functions as an important laboratory for understanding the global intersections of development, Islam, and geopolitics in a rapidly changing social environment.

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative field research to examine the constitutive duality of Arab-Islamic NGO philanthropy in Senegal, specifically how the same actions of these organizations can be simultaneously complementary and competitive, cooperative and transformative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Conducted over six months of fieldwork from January to June 2025, the research aimed to capture the contextual and lived experiences of NGO actors, state officials, Sufi religious authorities, and beneficiaries. A qualitative approach was chosen because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of meanings, perceptions, and motivations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative or statistical methods alone (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). More importantly, this approach is particularly suited to uncovering the interplay between structural conditions and individual agency, as well as the production of multiple, simultaneous interpretations of the same social phenomenon, which lies at the core of this study's analytical framework (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The fieldwork took place at four strategic sites across Senegal: Dakar (NGO headquarters), Touba (center of Muridiyya Sufi brotherhood), Kaolack (Tijaniyya religious crossroads), and Matam (humanitarian intervention zone). These sites were selected based on their socio-religious diversity and strategic importance, as they represent the key locations where Arab-Islamic NGOs operate most intensively (Seesemann, 2010; Ngom, 1970).

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observation, documentary analysis, and Social Network Analysis (SNA) across the four research sites (Patton, 2015). A total of five key informants were selected via purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015). These included the head of NGO APIJ (63 years old), an official from ABI (Association Bienfaisance Islamique), a government official from the Ministry of the Interior in Dakar, a Tidjane Sufi religious authority from Kaolack, and a young beneficiary from the Radjihy neighborhood in Dakar. The inclusion of both institutional actors and community members aimed to capture the multi-layered dimensions of constitutive duality, encompassing NGO strategies, state

regulatory practices, Sufi resistance, and beneficiary aspirations (Renders, 2002; Foucher & Dahou, 2009). In line with research ethics, the identities of all informants were anonymized using alphanumeric codes to ensure confidentiality and protect them from potential harm, particularly given the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of the populations involved. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted in French and Wolof (with the author providing translation), were audio-recorded with informed consent, and were transcribed verbatim in French before selective translation into English (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This study received ethical clearance from the University of Dakar Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. IRB-UD-2025-014).

Table 1
Profile of Informants

Code	Gender	Age	Position of Informant	Interview Date
INF-01	Male	63 years old	Head of NGO APIJ, Dakar	15 January 2025
INF-02	Male	Not specified	Official of ABI (Association Bienfaisance Islamique), Dakar	22 January 2025
INF-03	Male	Not specified	Government official, Ministry of the Interior (Religious Affairs), Dakar	5 February 2025
INF-04	Male	Not specified	Tidjane Sufi religious authority, Kaolack	18 February 2025
INF-05	Male	Not specified	Young beneficiary, Radjihiy neighborhood, Dakar	2 March 2025

Source: Developed by author, 2025.

The data obtained from interviews, observations, documents, and SNA were analyzed thematically using Bourdieu's field theory as the primary analytical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Coding was conducted manually by the author following a hybrid approach: deductive codes derived from Bourdieu's concepts (field, capital, habitus, doxa, heterodoxy, symbolic power) and inductive codes emerging from the data (e.g., "desert Arabic," "conquerors of the soul," "Senegalization of aid") (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To enhance trustworthiness, findings were member-checked with two informants (INF-03 and INF-05), and triangulation across all six data sources validated findings (Denzin, 2012).

Several limitations are acknowledged in this study. First, direct access to international donors in the Gulf was limited, leaving their internal strategic motivations only partially understood. Second, there is a potential reporting bias in interviews, as NGO leaders often emphasize success and charitable neutrality (Maxwell, 2013). Third, the small sample size (N=5) limits generalizability; however, the study's purpose is theoretical elaboration rather than statistical representation. Each informant was selected as a 'typical case' representing a distinct actor category within the religious field (Yin, 2018). Fourth, a significant limitation is the absence of female informants. While this reflects practical constraints, women's religious spaces were less accessible to the male researcher, it also represents a substantive gap, as women play crucial roles in both Sufi brotherhoods and NGO-run schools. Future research should employ female researchers to access these perspectives. Fifth, the study captures a snapshot of dynamics at a specific time (January to June 2025), making long-term impact assessment a challenge. While Senegal provides a particularly revealing case due to its strong Sufi traditions and secular state, the findings should be treated as context-specific. Comparative research across West Africa (Mali, Niger, Chad) would be needed to assess generalizability. To mitigate these limits, a triangulation strategy was rigorously applied by comparing the accounts of different actors, observation data, and various analytical methods (Denzin, 2012).

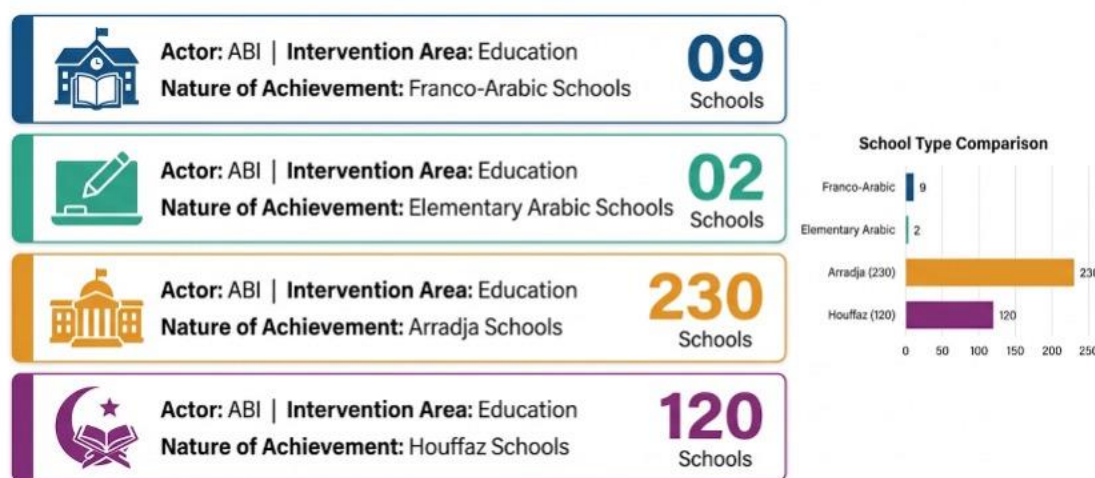
Mechanisms of Constitutive Duality: Between Filling Voids and Reshaping Authorities

Literature on transnational Islamic philanthropy demonstrates that Islamic organizations connected to the Middle East and the Gulf region do not function solely as humanitarian agencies but also as actors that reshape socio-religious power relations in recipient societies. In many contexts across Africa and Asia, these organizations operate simultaneously in two directions: on one hand, they fill the voids in public services that states have failed to provide; on the other hand, they help form new structures of authority through education, da'wa, aid distribution, and the construction of socio-religious networks. This pattern can be understood as "constitutive duality", a situation where development and humanitarian activities simultaneously become a medium for the production of new religious and political authority (Saggiomo, 2011; Sounaye, 2011; Benthall, 2016).

This phenomenon is clearly evident in the public infrastructure development practices of transnational Islamic NGOs in Senegal. Based on field data, at least three major organizations are actively involved: WAMY (World Assembly of Muslim Youth), ABI (Association Bienfaisance Islamique), and the

Al Falah Association. In the education sector, for instance, ABI has built over 350 schools divided into four categories: 09 Franco-Arabic schools, 02 elementary Arabic schools, 230 Arradja schools, and 120 Houffaz schools (Figure 1). In addition, the Al Falah Association established a faculty in the Commune of Diamaguène (Dakar) in 2008, which has been operational since 2009 and has enrolled 54 students from 2009 to 2017, with teaching conducted by doctors in Arabic and Quranic studies who are graduates of the association. This faculty demonstrates that “Islamic development” in Senegal is not merely basic but extends to higher education that shapes a new generation of Muslim intellectuals.

Figure 1
ABI's Achievements in the Educational Field



Source: Author Field Survey, 2025

These data reinforce the findings of [Renders \(2002\)](#) and [Soares \(2005\)](#) that Muslim organizations in Mali and Senegal are not only fundraising for the construction of mosques and schools but also entering the development arena previously dominated by the secular state. In Senegal, the state faces budgetary constraints that prevent it from building schools on a comparable scale. In this context, Arab-Islamic NGOs play a complementary role: they fill gaps in public services. However, behind this complementarity lies a normative project: the curriculum used does not fully follow the national education system but emphasizes Arabic language instruction and in-depth Islamic studies, which may shape specific religious orientations among the younger generation.

Beyond education, the social and health sectors also constitute significant fields of intervention. Field data show that ABI has built 120 wells in various regions of Senegal, while WAMY together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has built over 150 boreholes and wells, and Al Falah has added another 127 wells. In the agricultural sector, ABI distributed 120 seeders to farmers in the

Department of Louga, a form of support for the state's agricultural modernization policies. In the health sector, Al Falah operates an Islamic solidarity hospital providing free care, while WAMY organizes annual caravans specialized in cataract surgeries, reaching an average of 500 patients across all regions of the country.

Figure 2
Social and Health Infrastructure by Arab-Islamic NGOs



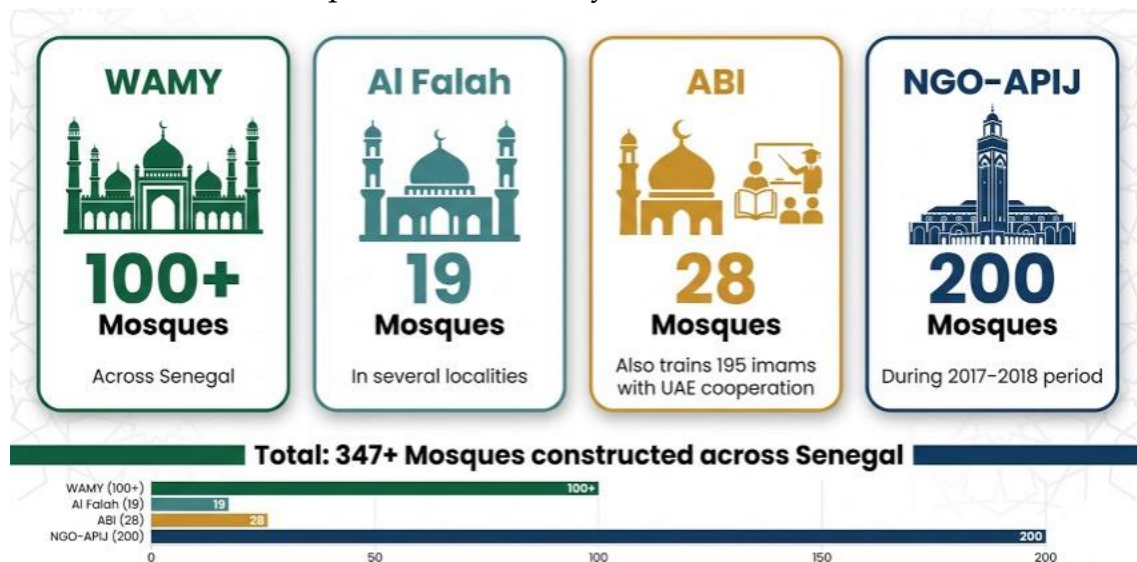
Source: Author Field Survey, 2025.

The findings indicate that Arab-Islamic NGOs in Senegal perform functions that extend beyond merely complementing state welfare programs. In several sectors, particularly in areas where state capacity is limited, these organizations increasingly assume responsibilities traditionally associated with public institutions. This pattern resembles [Saggiomo's \(2011\)](#) observations in post-state-collapse Somalia, where Islamic NGOs effectively substituted for the state in delivering essential social services. However, the Senegalese context differs in a crucial respect. Unlike Somalia, Senegal retains a functioning secular state whose political legitimacy is closely intertwined with influential Sufi brotherhoods. As a result, the expansion of Arab-Islamic NGOs takes place within an institutional environment characterized not only by service provision but also by religious and ideological competition. Consequently, philanthropic interventions cannot be interpreted solely as humanitarian initiatives; they also represent mechanisms through which competing religious actors seek to expand influence, legitimacy, and social authority.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the religious sector, where mosque construction has become one of the most visible indicators of institutional presence. Field data reveal a substantial scale of investment by major Arab-

Islamic NGOs. WAMY has constructed more than 100 mosques across Senegal, Al Falah has built 19 mosques, ABI has established 28 mosques while training 195 imams in collaboration with the United Arab Emirates, and NGO-APIJ reported the construction of 200 mosques alongside 10 Islamic training schools during the 2017–2018 period alone (Figure 3). Collectively, these four organizations have contributed to the establishment of at least 347 mosques, illustrating that religious infrastructure development functions not only as a form of charitable assistance but also as a strategic instrument for strengthening institutional influence, shaping religious authority, and expanding ideological networks within Senegal's evolving socio-religious landscape.

Figure 3
Mosque Construction by Arab-Islamic NGOs



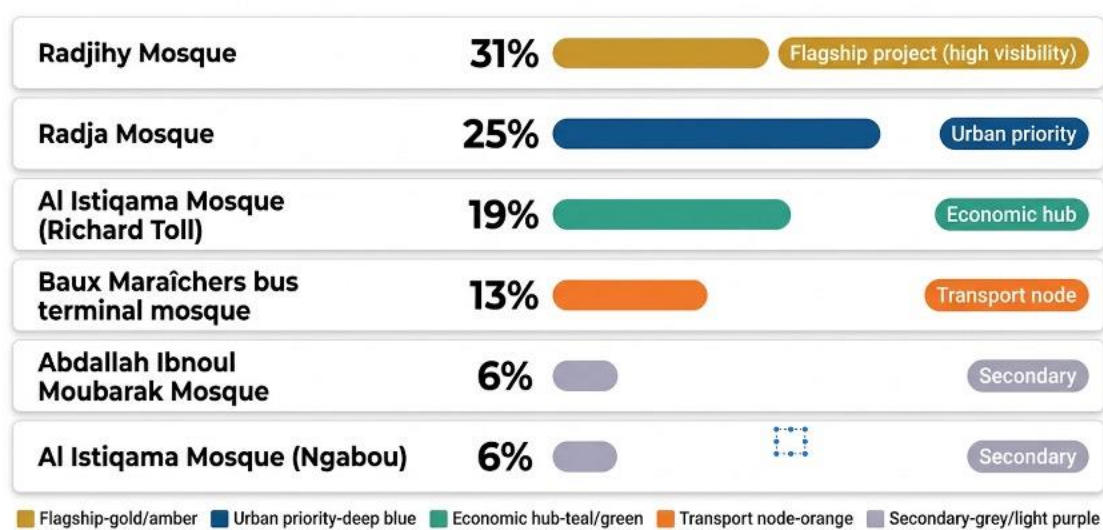
Source: Author Field Survey, 2025.

This finding aligns with [Leichtman's \(2022\)](#) argument that charitable complexes built by organizations from the Gulf region deliberately integrate schools, clinics, orphanages, and mosques within interconnected compounds. In Senegal, mosque construction never stands alone; it is always accompanied by supporting programs such as Quranic teaching, imam training, and aid distribution during religious occasions. Importantly, the Senegalese state does not officially manage all mosques. Their construction, as well as the selection and recruitment of imams and staff, is left to the discretion of NGOs and their donors ([Muckensturm, 2018](#)). Consequently, many mosques remain governed by their founders and funders, in this case, ABI and the UAE, and currently constitute a contribution to the development of Islam in Senegal, but also serve as autonomous poles of power competing with the authority of Sufi brotherhoods.

NGO investment strategies are also uneven. Data on the distribution frequency of six mosques funded by ABI show that the Radjihy Mosque, located in an expanding peri-urban neighborhood of Dakar, receives the highest share at 31% of the total funds in this sample. This is followed by the Radja Mosque (25%), confirming strategic priority on urban areas. The Al Istiqama Mosque in Richard Toll (19%) and the mosque at the Baux Maraîchers bus terminal (13%) represent significant investments in economic hubs and transport nodes. Meanwhile, the Abdallah Ibnoul Moubarak and Al Istiqama (Ngabou) mosques each receive only 6%, indicating smaller-scale projects or secondary zones of influence.

Figure 4

Relative Frequency Distribution of Mosque Construction by ABI



Source: Author Field Survey, 2025.

This uneven strategy demonstrates that NGOs make calculated decisions regarding the location and scale of their investments. Mosques are not built randomly but are placed in strategic locations to maximize social visibility and influence. In this context, physical construction is never neutral; it always carries a normative project, as emphasized by [Leichtman \(2022\)](#).

Constitutive duality also operates through the restructuring of religious authority. Transnational funding and networks enable the emergence of new Muslim elites who gain legitimacy through their connections to the Middle East and access to international resources. This phenomenon is also found in Senegal, where imams appointed by NGOs are often graduates of Middle Eastern universities who bring models of religiosity distinct from local Sufi traditions. A hadith cited in interviews provides theological legitimacy: *"Whoever builds a mosque for Allah, Allah will build for him, reports Muslim, a house in Paradise."* This hadith serves as a source of motivation for NGOs like WAMY to continue

building mosques wherever they find actors ready to carry a societal project conveyed by a Wahhabi vision of Islam (Karoui, 2018).

This process aligns with Horstmann's (2002) findings on Muslims in Southern Thailand, where new Muslim actors used funding, education, and international networks to reorganize local institutions such as mosques, Islamic schools, media, and social organizations. In Senegal, this reorganization produces new religious orientations that are more literalist and text-oriented, distinct from local Sufi traditions that tend to be mystical and based on personal relationships between disciples and sheikhs. Thus, educational and da'wa development not only expands access to services but also shapes new configurations of Islamic authority at the local level.

The distribution of aid during religious occasions such as Ramadan and Tabaski constitutes the third mechanism of constitutive duality. Sounaye's (2011) research in Niger shows that food distribution and social aid during these occasions become the most prominent public activities of Islamic development organizations. The same occurs in Senegal: WAMY, for example, actively distributes donations during Muslim holidays and provides guidance through seminars, meetings, and educational outings for sponsored orphaned children. Orphan sponsorship programs are also carried out by Turkey at the Islamic Institute of Dakar.

Such aid not only functions as charity but also serves to strengthen organizational social visibility and expand their moral legitimacy within society. Religious occasions are chosen because they carry high symbolic power and can consolidate emotional relationships between aid providers, religious figures, and recipient communities. In this context, social aid opens the possibility of forming new patron-client relationships, as shown by Hasram (2023) in his study of Muslim politics in Cambodia, where connections to the global Islamic world become important political capital that reshapes the bargaining position of Muslim elites. In the Senegalese context, Renders (2002) also shows that the discourse of "Islamic development" functions as an instrument of political competition and the struggle for public legitimacy.

Thus, the mechanisms of constitutive duality in Senegal operate through a combination of social service provision and the formation of new authority structures. The educational, health, and welfare infrastructure built by Islamic NGOs indeed makes a tangible contribution to filling state service gaps, particularly in regions experiencing institutional weakness. Yet at the same time, this infrastructure also becomes a medium for the dissemination of specific religious visions, the formation of new religious elites, and the restructuring of social and political relations at the local level. In this context, transnational

Islamic philanthropy cannot be understood solely as charitable or development activity; rather, it represents a socio-religious project that simultaneously produces welfare and authority.

Impacts on Sufi Brotherhoods, the Secular State, and Beneficiaries' Social Mobility

The development of transnational Islamic philanthropy and the expansion of religious infrastructure in Senegal have produced complex social transformations. This phenomenon touches deeper dimensions concerning religious authority, state-religion relations, and social mobility aspirations among young Muslims. These dynamics are particularly significant because Senegal's Muslim society has long been shaped by the dominance of Sufi brotherhoods, especially the Tijaniyya and Muridiyya, which function as spiritual, social, political, and economic institutions exerting profound influence on community life (Seesemann, 2010). Sufi brotherhoods in Senegal have long constituted the primary foundation of local Islamic social structure. The dominance of Tijaniyya and Muridiyya means religious authority is based not solely on formal 'ulama' but also on spiritual relationships between sheikh and disciple, pilgrimage networks, Qur'anic education, and brotherhood-based institutions. Since the end of the 19th century, these brotherhoods developed into mass institutions with extensive influence in public life, forming religious cities and pilgrimage centers that function as spaces for spiritual authority and social identity markers (Ngom, 1970). Holy cities such as Touba, the center of Muridiyya, demonstrate that brotherhoods are social systems organizing economic life, education, and political relations (Seesemann, 2010).

The entry of transnational Islamic organizations and donor-funded development models has given rise to new forms of contestation over religious authority. Sufi brotherhoods frequently face challenges from reformist groups that criticize Sufi practices as "cultural Islam" and offer a more literalist model connected to Middle Eastern centers of authority (*Islamic Trends and Movements*, 2022). This contestation appears through changes in da'wa styles, educational systems, madrasa curricula, mosque architecture, and scholarly authority based on transnational credentials. These new models are often perceived as threats to Senegalese Islamic traditions built through brotherhood networks and local intellectual traditions (Ngom et al., 2023).

This influence becomes visible when international Islamic donors build modern Arabic schools, monumental mosques, and Islamic education centers distinct from Senegal's traditional *daara* system. In the Tijaniyya tradition, Islamic education is understood as moral formation, spirituality, and charismatic

relationships between disciples and caliphs. [Horstmann \(2002\)](#) shows that educational networks and transnational connections produce new Muslim elites who gain legitimacy through Middle Eastern education and international resources. Thus, new educational institutions are understood as efforts to shape Islamic authority different from local Sufi traditions. Empirical data from Senegal provide concrete evidence. ABI has built over 350 schools, including 230 Arradja and 120 Houffaz schools emphasizing Arabic and Islamic studies. Al Falah established a faculty in Diamaguène enrolling 54 students (2009-2017), taught by doctors in Arabic and Quranic studies who graduated from the association and studied in Arab-Muslim countries. These institutions produce a new generation of religious scholars who may hold orientations different from historical brotherhoods.

Mosque construction further illustrates this contestation. WAMY built over 100 mosques, Al Falah 19, ABI 28, and NGO-APIJ 200 during 2017-2018 alone. The Senegalese state does not officially manage all mosques. Their construction and imam selection are left to NGOs and foreign donors ([Muckensturm, 2018](#)). A UAE member stated: *"We have built mosques, almost 100 to 200 constructions. We build for everyone. Still on the religious level, we teach the Quran to Muslim children"* ([INF-01, 15 January 2025](#)). While mosques are built for all Sufi orders, tensions remain. Imam recruitment controlled by foreign NGOs means these mosques serve as autonomous power poles, materializing particular ideologies while building specific Islamic identity ([Ghandour, 2002](#)). The impact on state-brotherhood relations is equally significant. Senegal is formally secular, but state-brotherhood relations are very close. Since the postcolonial period, the government has built cooperation with brotherhood elites to maintain political stability and social legitimacy. [Parasher \(2012\)](#) explains the state actively uses Islamic symbols in constructing national political legitimacy. The state never truly separates religion from the public sphere; rather, it makes religious authority integral to national governance.

However, the expansion of Islamic NGOs has created a more complex arena. Islamic organizations now take roles in education, health, aid distribution, and infrastructure. This produces ambiguous state-NGO relationships. The state needs cooperation to meet development targets but faces challenges maintaining control over foreign funding, religious curricula, and transnational authority. [Renders \(2002\)](#) calls this an "ambiguous adventure," where Muslim organizations enter development arenas previously dominated by the secular state. This ambiguity is evident in state responses. Facing underfunding, the state regulates while collaborating to achieve SDGs. NGOs like SOIS work with ministries. To be effective, NGOs must adapt to local realities, a "Senegalization

of aid.” Yet external funding creates rivalries among local associations. A government official stated: *“These infrastructures relieve pressure on public facilities. Our role is to ensure sermons respect public order and national unity. There is a fine line between the religious and the political”* (INF-03, 5 February 2025). This captures the state’s dual position: appreciating NGO complementarity while remaining vigilant about foreign-funded religious activities.

Jourde et al. (2021) show that despite Hajj liberalization, Senegal maintains its position as primary regulator of transnational religious networks. Yet increasing influence of international Islamic philanthropy and Muslim migration networks has created new channels for resource distribution outside formal state structures. Thus, state-Islamic institution relations are ongoing negotiation between cooperation and competition (Foucher & Dahou, 2009). The transformation also impacts young Senegalese Muslims. Arabic-language education and modern Islamic institutions are increasingly viewed as pathways for social mobility through migration, remittances, scholarships, and religious networks. Young people see Arabic schools, Islamic universities, and monumental mosques as symbols of modernity, status, and economic opportunity. One young beneficiary said: *“Before, we prayed in a shack. Now we have a beautiful mosque. It makes us feel respected. Arabic classes could open doors for me”* (INF-05, 2 March 2025). This shows NGO-built infrastructure is perceived as a gateway to social advancement.

Arabic literacy and Ajami tradition shape these aspirations. Research on Wolofal shows Arabic script use for local languages has long been part of Senegalese Muslim life, developing strongly within brotherhoods like Muridiyya (Ngom, 1970). Arabic ability and modern Islamic education are now increasingly valued for their symbolic and economic capital (Ngom et al., 2023). International migration reinforces this process. Kaag (2022) shows Murid networks in Europe form transnational social fields allowing ideas, practices, and solidarity to circulate between Senegal and global Muslim communities. Large mosques, modern schools, and Arabic networks become symbols of connection to the global Muslim world.

Nevertheless, these impacts are not uniform. For Sufi elites, transnational Islamic institutions threaten local authority. A Tidjane authority stated: *“They build a beautiful mosque. But the imam speaks ‘desert Arabic’ and looks down on our practices, our dhikr, and devotion to saints. They come as conquerors of the soul”* (INF-04, 18 February 2025). This reveals how mosque construction is interpreted as ideological competition challenging local Sufi practices. For youth and beneficiaries, new Islamic infrastructure is interpreted as opportunity for social mobility, education access, and modern Muslim identity. Thus, Islamic

development produces multi-interpretive impacts: simultaneously a social welfare project, da'wa expansion, identity formation, and arena for contesting religious and political authority (Renders, 2002; Foucher & Dahou, 2009). In conclusion, transnational Islamic philanthropy in Senegal challenges Sufi dominance, places the secular state in ambiguous negotiation, and creates new mobility aspirations for youth. These impacts are interpreted differently across social groups, producing a contested landscape of religious and social transformation.

Polyphony of Meanings: Framing Conflicts between Charity, Regulation, Competition, and Opportunity

The development of transnational Islamic philanthropy and the construction of religious infrastructure in Senegal have never carried a single, unified meaning. Mosques, Arabic schools, da'wa centers, and other social facilities are always understood differently by various social actors. In the Senegalese public sphere, this construction becomes an arena for contestation: NGOs frame it as charity; the state views it as regulation; Sufi brotherhoods interpret it as ideological competition; while young beneficiaries see it as opportunity for social mobility. Thus, transnational Islamic development is a space of "polyphony of meanings", where a single religious project generates multiple, conflicting interpretations that coexist simultaneously (Renders, 2002; Foucher & Dahou, 2009).

From the perspective of transnational Islamic NGOs, mosque construction is presented as charitable giving (*sadaqa*) and strengthening Muslim solidarity. Literature shows that the expansion of da'wa and philanthropy aims not only to provide social services but also to increase Islam's visibility in the public sphere. Diallo (2008) explains that political liberalization and faith-based humanitarian organizations in West Africa have opened new spaces for Islamic actors to expand social influence. Mosque construction is positioned as a religious mission and moral investment in the Muslim community. Development aid is understood as an act of worship that strengthens collective Muslim identity, framed in moral language such as "building the house of Allah" or "reviving da'wa" (Diallo, 2008). This charitable framing is articulated by an ABI official involved in the Radjihi Mosque, which received 31% of the organization's investment. He stated: "We are responding to a dire need. Giving a house to Allah is the most beautiful investment. People will pray in dignity and receive authentic Islamic teaching" (INF-02, 22 January 2025). This reveals how NGOs frame activities as selfless piety, with "authentic teaching" implying correctness compared to local practices.

The meaning of charity is linked to expanding transnational networks. Ouallet (2019) shows that global Islamic networks operate through “territorialization”, marking social and geographic space through mosques, schools, and da’wa centers. Such infrastructure becomes “spatial marking” (*marquages spatiaux*) demonstrating specific Islamic networks’ presence and influence. Mosque construction is never neutral: it is simultaneously charity and a medium for expanding social influence and reproducing da’wa networks. Transnational Islamic philanthropy functions as humanitarian activity and as a strategy for constructing new religious authority (Ouallet, 2019). However, the NGO framing is not always accepted by the state. For Senegal, transnational religious infrastructure is read through regulation and political stability. Though formally secular, the state maintains close relations with Tijaniyya and Muridiyya Sufi brotherhoods, forcing continuous negotiation of the religion-politics boundary. Diallo (2008) emphasizes that increasing religious influence makes religion a governance issue. The state must consider the socio-political impact of foreign funding, large mosques, and Islamic educational institutions connected to international donors.

A Ministry of Interior official stated: *“These infrastructures relieve pressure on public facilities. Our role is to ensure sermons respect public order and national unity. There is a fine line between the religious and the political”* (INF-03, 5 February 2025). This captures the state’s ambivalent position: acknowledging NGO complementarity while remaining vigilant about foreign-funded religious activities. State concerns are amplified because transnational Islamic networks transcend national borders. Ouallet (2019) explains that reformist networks in the Sahel move across borders, building connectivity the state cannot fully control. Religious infrastructure construction can be understood as expanding ideologies that may disrupt domestic balance. Thus, Senegal views mosque construction not merely as charity but as regulation, foreign funding oversight, and national stability management.

On the other hand, Sufi brotherhoods interpret transnational Islamic infrastructure as ideological competition. Tijaniyya and Muridiyya have for centuries been the primary foundation of Senegalese socio-religious life, with authority that is spiritual, social, economic, and political. Seesemann (2010) explains that West African Sufism developed through charisma, education, pilgrimage, and religious patronage deeply rooted in society. Reformist Islamic models supported by foreign donors are perceived as threats to local religious authority. Kane (2012) shows that reformist groups seek to purify Islamic practice by criticizing Sufi traditions as too syncretic. New mosques, modern Arabic schools, and transnational da’wa centers can be read as an Islamic reform project

indirectly challenging Sufi dominance. Ouallet (2019) calls this competition of “territorialization” between Sufi Islam and reformist networks. Religious infrastructure becomes a symbol of struggle over space, authority, and legitimacy. A Tidjane authority expressed: *“They build a beautiful mosque. But the imam speaks ‘desert Arabic’ and looks down on our practices, our dhikr, and devotion to saints. They come as conquerors of the soul”* (INF-04, 18 February 2025). This reveals how traditional authorities perceive NGO-led mosque construction not as charity but as ideological conquest. “Desert Arabic” distinguishes Gulf practices from Senegalese traditions, while “conquerors of the soul” suggests anxiety about eroding spiritual authority.

Transnational organizations bring different education and authority models. The brotherhood system builds legitimacy through spiritual relationships and local, charismatic knowledge. Reformist networks emphasize formal Middle Eastern credentials, Arabic proficiency, and text-based authority. This creates symbolic tension over who defines “authentic” Islam in Senegal (Kane, 2012; Ouallet, 2019). However, young people interpret transnational Islamic infrastructure differently. For many young Senegalese Muslims, modern Arabic schools, large mosques, and international education networks are opportunities for social mobility and a better future. Modern Islamic institutions are means of acquiring social status, international connections, and economic opportunities.

A young beneficiary stated: *“Before, we prayed in a shack. Now we have a beautiful mosque. It makes us feel respected. Arabic classes could open doors for me”* (INF-05, 2 March 2025). This reveals how infrastructure is perceived as a gateway to social advancement. The mosque’s aesthetic quality provides respect and dignity, while Arabic classes are instrumental for future opportunities. Riccio’s research shows transnational Islamic networks support social mobility and migration (Sokova, 2020). Mosques function as social spaces connecting local communities with global opportunities. Ouallet (2019) asserts that involvement in specific Islamic networks can be a “key to accessing resources.” Arabic schools and modern infrastructure are understood as future investments.

This framing explains why transnational Islamic infrastructure receives strong social support despite criticism. Beneficiary communities gain access to education, social services, and religious modernity symbols. The Radjihy Mosque, 31% of ABI’s investment, demonstrates how a single project generates multiple framings: charity (NGO), regulation (state), competition (Sufi), opportunity (youth). Thus, conflict of framing demonstrates that transnational Islamic development is an ongoing arena of meaning negotiation. No single meaning dominates. Meaning is constantly negotiated within power relations

involving local actors, the state, transnational networks, and beneficiaries. Ultimately, mosque construction cannot be understood merely as philanthropy or physical development. It is part of broader social transformation where religious space becomes a symbolic battleground. Polyphony of meaning becomes central: one project can be understood simultaneously as charity, threat, regulation, or opportunity, depending on the actor's social position and interests.

Bourdieuian Analysis: Understanding Constitutive Duality in Senegal's Religious Field

This section presents a comprehensive theoretical interpretation of the findings using Pierre Bourdieu's field theory. The three empirical sub-sections, mechanisms of constitutive duality, impacts on Sufi brotherhoods and the secular state, and polyphony of meanings, are synthesized through Bourdieu's concepts of *field*, *capital*, *habitus*, *doxa*, *heterodoxy*, and *symbolic power* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The central argument is that Senegal's religious field, long dominated by Sufi brotherhoods with their established *doxa* and *habitus*, is being fundamentally restructured by Arab-Islamic NGOs carrying heterodox visions and transnational capital. The constitutive duality observed, same action simultaneously complementary and competitive, cooperative and transformative, is not an anomaly but a structural feature of this contested field, produced by colliding *habitus*, unequal capital distribution, and ongoing symbolic struggle for legitimate authority (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 166).

Understanding Senegal as a religious field requires mapping actors and their positions. Bourdieu defines a *field* as a structured social space with its own laws, power relations, and struggles for monopoly over legitimate authority (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Historically, Sufi brotherhoods, particularly Tijaniyya and Muridiyya, have occupied the dominant position (Seesemann, 2010). Their dominance extends beyond spirituality into social, economic, and political domains. Touba, the center of Muridiyya, functions as a parallel authority structure organizing economic life, education, and political relations (Seesemann, 2010; Ngom, 1970). Into this established field, Arab-Islamic NGOs have entered as new actors. Organizations such as WAMY, ABI, Al Falah, and APIJ bring substantial economic capital (Gulf funding), social capital (transnational networks connecting Senegal to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkey, and Iran), and cultural capital (Middle Eastern educational credentials) (Benthall, 2016; Leichtman, 2022).

The Senegalese state occupies an ambivalent position. Formally secular, it has historically aligned with Sufi brotherhoods to maintain political stability and social legitimacy (Parasher, 2012). However, NGOs with transnational resources

have created a new arena where the state navigates between cooperation and competition (Renders, 2002; Foucher & Dahou, 2009). Beneficiaries, particularly young Senegalese Muslims, occupy a subordinate position, seeking to acquire new resources through NGO-provided infrastructure (Kaag, 2022). Each actor's position shapes their perceptions: the Sufi authority speaking of "conquerors of the soul" speaks from threatened dominance; the state official warning of the "fine line" speaks from ambivalent regulation; the young man seeing "doors" opening speaks from aspirational subordination; the NGO official framing mosque construction as "the most beautiful investment" speaks from confident entry.

Five types of capital are contested. *Economic capital* is most visible: 347 mosques, over 350 schools, and 397 wells require substantial Gulf funding. ABI's strategy, allocating 31% of mosque funds to Radjiy Mosque, demonstrates strategic deployment for visibility and influence. *Symbolic capital* has long been held by Sufi brotherhoods. A Tidjane caliph's authority rests on spiritual lineage, charismatic connection, and popular recognition, not wealth or formal credentials (Seesemann, 2010). This symbolic capital is precisely what NGO entry threatens. *Cultural capital* takes the form of educational credentials and linguistic competence. *Arabized intellectuals* who studied in Middle Eastern universities serve as imams and teachers, possessing cultural capital traditional marabouts may lack (Ngom et al., 2023). *Social capital* operates at multiple scales. Sufi brotherhoods possess dense, locally embedded social capital built over generations. NGOs possess transnational social capital connecting local actors to donors across the Muslim world (Kaag, 2014, 2022; Benthall, 2016). Finally, the state possesses *regulatory capital*, formal authority to authorize, monitor, and constrain religious activity, limited by resource constraints and historical dependence on Sufi brotherhoods for political legitimacy (Brossier, 2017; Jourde et al., 2021).

The collision of *habitus* between Sufi traditionalism and reformist literalism lies at the heart of these dynamics. *Habitus* is the system of durable dispositions shaping perceptions and actions (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). The Sufi habitus, shaped by generations of Tijaniyya and Muridiyya practice, includes dispositions toward *dhikr*, saint veneration, seeking *baraka* from marabouts, and a syncretic approach integrating local culture with Islamic ritual (Seesemann, 2010; Miran, 2005). The reformist habitus, carried by NGOs, is shaped by Middle Eastern study, literalist scripture interpretation, and da'wa methodologies emphasizing textual correctness over spiritual experience (Leichtman, 2022; Kane, 2012). This collision is experienced as visceral discomfort, as the Tidjane authority expressed:

the imported imam “looks down on our practices, our dhikr, and our devotion to the saints” (INF-04, 18 February 2025).

Senegal’s religious field is undergoing transformation from doxa to heterodoxy. Doxa refers to taken-for-granted beliefs appearing as natural and unquestionable; heterodoxy refers to alternative visions challenging doxa (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164). Historically, Sufi dominance constituted a doxic condition: to be Muslim in Senegal meant following a Sufi order. Practices of *dhikr*, saint veneration, and seeking blessings were unquestioned. NGO entry introduces heterodoxy: reformist Islam presents an alternative forcing questions the doxic order rendered unnecessary. *Symbolic power*, the power to construct reality and impose meanings as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 166), is visible in the documented polyphony. Each actor seeks to impose their framing: NGO frames mosque construction as charity; state frames it as regulation; Sufi brotherhood frames it as conquest; youth frame it as opportunity (Renders, 2002; Foucher & Dahou, 2009). This is a struggle for symbolic power, the power to define reality.

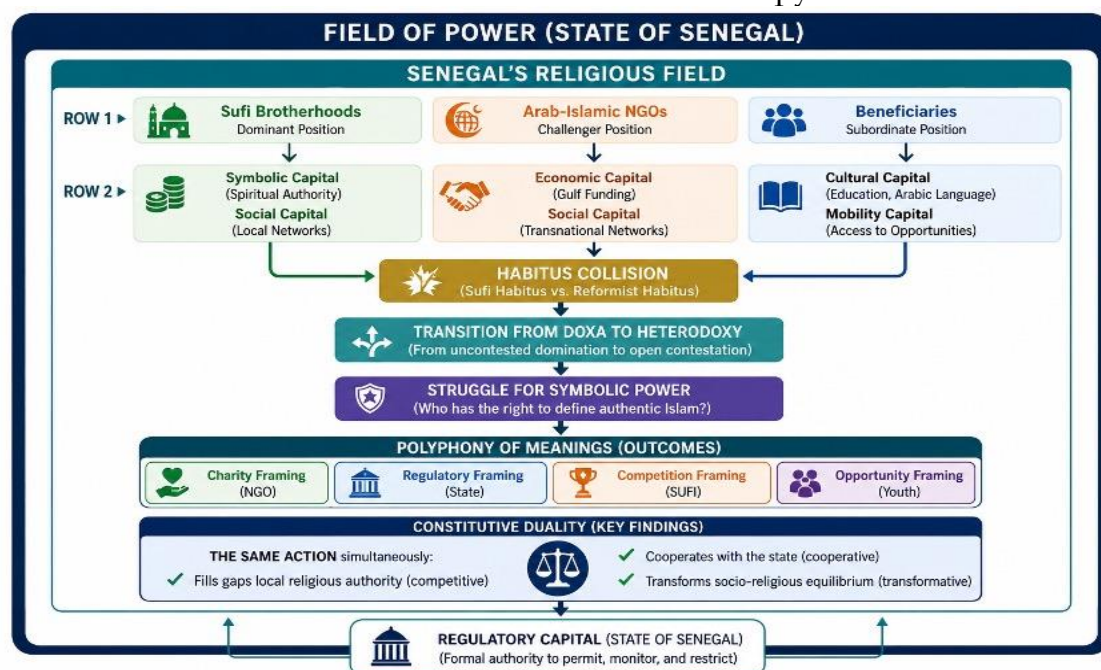
Constitutive duality is the product of three simultaneous conditions. First, duality requires a field with multiple actors occupying different positions and possessing different forms of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Second, duality requires a field in transition from doxa to heterodoxy (Bourdieu, 1977). Third, duality requires a mismatch between habitus of different actors (Bourdieu, 1990). When habitus align, actions are interpreted consistently. When habitus collide, as Sufi traditionalist collides with reformist literalist, the same action can be perceived as charity, threat, regulation, or opportunity. Senegal serves as a laboratory for global dynamics connecting development, Islam, and geopolitics (Soares, 2005, 2020; Gomez-Perez & Leblon, 2020). What is at stake is not merely resource distribution but the definition of legitimate Islam, proper authority, and the good life. Transnational Islamic philanthropy cannot be understood through binary categories of good or bad, aid or interference. It must be understood as a complex process where welfare and authority, complementarity and competition, cooperation and transformation are produced simultaneously (Saggiomo, 2011; Sounaye, 2011; Benthall, 2016; Leichtman, 2022).

To analyze in depth the phenomenon of constitutive duality in Arab-Islamic NGO philanthropy in Senegal, this study employs a conceptual framework built upon the Field Theory of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The selection of Bourdieu’s theory is based on its unique capacity to bridge structural and agential analysis, as well as to capture the dynamics of power, the production of authority, and symbolic struggle within structured social spaces. Bourdieu offers a set of interconnected concepts that are highly relevant to the findings of this

research: *field* as an arena of struggle among actors; *capital* as resources that are contested; *habitus* as a system of dispositions shaping perceptions and actions; *doxa* and *heterodoxy* as conditions of unquestioned belief versus alternative visions that challenge such beliefs; and *symbolic power* and *symbolic violence* as mechanisms of domination through the imposition of legitimate meaning. By employing this framework, the research does not merely describe what is happening, that NGOs build infrastructure, that Sufi brotherhoods feel threatened, that the state is ambivalent, that youth see opportunities, but also explains why it happens and how all these phenomena are systematically interconnected. Thus, Bourdieu's conceptual framework serves as a theoretical lens that enables this study to move beyond empirical description toward a structural understanding of the mechanisms, impacts, and polyphony of meanings that have been elaborated in the research findings.

Figure 5

A Bourdieusian Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Constitutive Duality in Transnational Islamic Philanthropy



Source: Develop by author, 2025.

The conceptual framework above visually illustrates how Senegal's religious field functions as an arena of struggle in which four main actors, Sufi brotherhoods, Arab-Islamic NGOs, the secular state, and beneficiaries, occupy different positions and compete for various forms of capital. Sufi brotherhoods, with their abundant symbolic capital and local social capital, occupy a dominant position that is threatened by the entry of new actors. Arab-Islamic NGOs, with

their economic capital from Gulf donors and transnational social capital, enter the field as challengers carrying heterodoxy, alternative visions of what constitutes authentic Islam. The secular state, with its regulatory capital limited by resource constraints, occupies an ambivalent position between cooperation and competition. Beneficiaries, particularly the younger generation, occupy a subordinate position and seek to accumulate cultural capital and mobility capital through engagement with NGO-provided infrastructure.

The collision between the Sufi habitus (shaped through generations of practice of *dhikr*, veneration of saints, and disciple-marabout relationships) and the reformist habitus (shaped through Middle Eastern education, textual literalism, and a purifying orientation) serves as the engine driving the field's transition from a state of doxa, where Sufi dominance was accepted as natural and unquestionable, toward a state of heterodoxy, where competing visions of authentic Islam openly contend. In this transitional process, each actor deploys symbolic power to impose their framing as the legitimate interpretation of the same philanthropic action: the NGO frames it as charity, the state frames it as regulation, the Sufi brotherhood frames it as ideological competition, and the youth frame it as opportunity. The final outcome of all these processes is constitutive duality, the main finding of this research that the same action is simultaneously complementary and competitive, cooperative and transformative. This framework not only explains the specific findings of the research but also opens pathways toward broader theoretical generalization about how transnational religious philanthropy operates in the context of social fields in transition, where different habitus collide, multiple forms of capital are contested, and meaning is never singular but is always produced through symbolic struggle among actors occupying different positions.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Arab-Islamic NGOs in Senegal operate through a constitutive duality: their actions are simultaneously complementary and competitive, cooperative and transformative. The construction of over 347 mosques, 350 schools, and 397 wells fills critical gaps in public services, yet these same infrastructures reshape religious authority by appointing NGO-controlled imams and introducing reformist Islam. The Senegalese state occupies an ambivalent position, collaborating with NGOs to achieve development goals while struggling to maintain regulatory control over foreign funding and religious curricula. Sufi brotherhoods experience this presence as an ideological threat, while young beneficiaries interpret the same infrastructure as an opportunity for social mobility. Using Bourdieu's field theory, this study

theorizes constitutive duality as the product of a religious field in transition from doxa to heterodoxy, where colliding habitus and unequal capital produce multiple, simultaneous meanings. The polyphony of framing, charity, regulation, competition, opportunity, reveals that transnational Islamic philanthropy cannot be reduced to binary categories of aid or interference. Senegal serves as a laboratory for global dynamics linking development, Islam, and geopolitics. Future research should examine long-term effects on religious authority and conduct comparative studies across West Africa. Ultimately, managing this duality requires nuanced policy that distinguishes humanitarian aid from religious authority formation.

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Ethical Approval

This study involved primary data collection through field research with human participants. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews and observations were conducted. The identities of participants have been anonymized, and all data were treated confidentially in accordance with accepted ethical principles for social science research.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Contributors

Alassane Sow

ORCID:  <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1249-8779>

Email: sociosow@gmail.com

Kamali

ORCID:  <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0602-0125>

Email: Kamali@iaimu.ac.id

Imam Buchari

ORCID:  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6835-366X>

Email: Buchoryshihab09@gmail.com

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