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From Tolerating Informality to Formalizing Prohibition: Religious Practices of West African Migrants in France (1960s–2020s)

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Abstract

This article addresses the concept of arrival infrastructure through religious practices. More specifically, this article is about the visibility of Muslim religious practices of West African migrants in France from the 1960s to the present day. The article is mainly based on ethnographic fieldwork on foyers conducted in the Paris region from 2016 until 2022 but also draws on archival research undertaken in the Paris City Archives. Foyers are a specialised housing system consisting of hostels for (post)colonial—mainly African—male migrant workers created in the 1950s. From the 2000s, foyers underwent significant transformation: their architecture and legal framework changed with the foyer giving way to the *résidence sociale* (social residence). African migrants were no longer the only residents in these new facilities, and their socio-spatial practices were closely monitored by building managers. Prayer rooms and mosques that existed in foyers disappeared following the transformation, leading to more informal religious spaces and practices. This article is constructed chronologically and aims to focus on the blurred frontier between formal and informal religious practices and their transformation across time: from being tolerated, or even encouraged, by policymakers and foyer managers to the progressive disappearance of collective religious activities in foyers or social residences. This article highlights the negotiations, conflicts, and tensions between residents, building managers, neighbours, and policymakers and their spatial consequences for everyday religious practices in the very tense post-2015 Paris attacks context marked by rising Islamophobia.

Keywords

arrival infrastructure; France; housing; Islam; religion; West African migration

1. Introduction

This article aims to interrogate the concept of arrival infrastructures understood, as proposed by Meeus et al. (2019), as "those parts of the urban fabric within which newcomers become entangled on arrival, and where their future or translocal social mobilities are produced as much as negotiated" (p. 1). The article thus examines the spaces that migrants use and live in and more specifically aims to interrogate the concept of arrival infrastructures through the analysis of Muslim spaces of worship. The purpose of this article is not to analyse how the arrival infrastructure is built by stakeholders but to understand how historical and political contexts shape such infrastructure. The case of West African migrants living in the centre of the French capital, Paris, allows us to propose a socio-historical analysis of Muslim religious spaces as a way to understand the evolution of the West African arrival infrastructure. The article analyses how practices of worship, and accordingly, the existence of spaces of worship, are obliged to navigate the shifting relationships between different actors and the general context, as well as between formal and informal practices. In this article, we aim to move beyond the formal–informal dichotomy and explore a spectrum of practices from formal to informal to highlight the processes of formalisation and local negotiation between actors (Biehl, 2022; Fawaz, 2017). Indeed, this article discusses literature addressing how urban policies are dealing with informal practices in urban spaces. Some authors, such as Fawaz (2017) in her work on Beirut, and Schillebeeckx et al. (2018) in Belgium, aim to enrich and guide planning policies using an informality framework or by highlighting the importance of local knowledge. But in this article, we want to highlight how urban and housing policies produce informality through the consequences of discourses and political acts on spaces and spatial practices. In other words, this article does not seek to define what is and what is not (in)formality, but to examine, through a socio-historical analysis, how the political response to a social or spatial practice determines its formal or informal character.

In order to understand the links between formality and informality, religious practices, and arrival infrastructures, we propose to analyse the case of West African migration in France and the presence of Muslim religious practice in Paris within a special habitat: the foyer. Migrant worker foyers represent a unique model of reception and accommodation housing dedicated to immigrant workers and were created by the French government in the 1950s. The foyers were designed to accommodate men from former colonies coming to the metropole to work, and hosted predominantly men from North Africa, mainly Algeria, and West Africa, mainly Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal (Bernardot, 1997; Sayad, 1980; Timera, 1996). Built in the heart of working-class neighbourhoods, near factories that employed migrant workers, or created through hasty conversion of former barracks, foyers are visible in all major French towns, including Paris and its immediate suburbs. Foyers today still mark the French urban space, despite the fact that from the late 1990s, the buildings were converted into social residences, a specific type of social housing dedicated to low-income groups (Béguin, 2015; Mbodj-Pouye, 2023). The architecture was completely transformed to abide by new laws and regulations on access to buildings and their by-laws. Large collective spaces (dormitories, bathrooms, kitchens, and multipurpose rooms) designed in the 1960s and appropriated over the years by foyer residents were transformed into studio units, affecting directly the daily practices of the residents. In this article, we will in particular delve into the consequences of this transformation on the practices of Muslim worship in the foyers for both residents and neighbours.

Indeed, the literature highlights the role of urban spaces and habitats in the organisation of migration and the integration of new arrivals (Beeckmans, 2022; Boccagni, 2022, 2023; Meeus et al., 2019; Wessendorf,

2019). Moreover, being part of the "spatial turn," several researchers have studied the particular role that religious practices play in the daily routine of migrants and in the production of arrival spaces (Knott, 2010). In the literature, spaces of worship appear to be places of encounter used by newcomers to gather information, as well as by long-established migrants to create a place for daily socialisation (Bava, 2005; Beeckmans, 2019; Portilla, 2018; Timera, 2008). Timera (2008) highlights the role of religious practices in the West African diaspora in France as a structuring element for intergenerational solidarity between long-established migrants and newcomers. In the French context, religious spaces in foyers play a key role as they allow a vast diversity of Muslims to meet every day in the same building, producing a central space for worshippers, as churches may do in other national contexts (Beeckmans, 2019; Portilla, 2018). The importance of the foyer for religious practices also arises from the fact that there are few mosques in French cities, and especially in Paris. Indeed, over the decades, foyers became crucial places for Islam (Timera, 2008). This article wishes to contribute to the literature with a case study on a Parisian foyer and its architecture. We want to highlight how Muslim religious spaces have changed over time, over a span of more than 60 years, transforming *de facto* the potential arrival infrastructures that are foyers. We will emphasise in particular the changes in terms of the type of actors, spaces, and dynamics at play when borders between formal and informal are negotiated. In addition to examining the role of religion in migrant reception, the aim is also to study the changes that have taken place over the decades for the actors in question, and the impact of the architectural transformation of foyers, as well as changes in the wider context (anti-immigration discourse, the construction of a "Muslim problem" since the 1980s [Hajjat & Mohammed, 2013], and political positioning following the 2015 attacks). This article, constructed chronologically, is thus also a contribution to documenting the presence of Islam in France and its political treatment from the original vantage point of a sociology of architectural space and its uses.

Our article therefore seeks to retrace the history of Muslim worship practices in a Parisian foyer built in 1969 and converted into a social residence in 2011. By structuring the history in five phases, we want to shed light on the links between arrival infrastructures and religious practices, while also highlighting how changes in the political, economic, and social context, as well as the architectural context of the building, led the various actors involved to navigate between formal practices or favour informal use of spaces. The article embraces an ethnographic approach, and aims to bring to the fore the relationships between various actors, in particular foyer residents, foyer managers, and policymakers at both the city and national level. The hypothesis is that by observing foyer spaces and the religious practices that take place there, it is possible to grasp the dynamics and transformations in general policies regarding the visibility of Islam in France and the role that foyers can play as arrival infrastructures.

The article starts with a brief presentation of the methodology and fieldwork undertaken during the study on which the article is based, and then unfolds the history of the foyer and its spaces of worship in five phases, starting with the creation and the early years of the foyer (1st phase), the decade of the 1990s when the foyer became a public problem (2nd), its transformation into a social residence (3rd), the post-attack context (4th), and finally recent developments (5th).

2. Methodology

This article is based on the ethnographic study of a social residence, formerly a migrant worker foyer, undertaken as part of my doctoral thesis in sociology, and understood as an ethnography of buildings, that is,

"a fine-grained ethnographic research of the envisioning, construction, and use of building projects" (Lopez, 2011). The research took place between February 2016 and March 2020, and then continued with repeated visits in the years that followed. During the ethnographic study, I undertook observation of spaces, whether individual (studio units) or collective (corridors, halls, and multipurpose rooms). Moreover, my presence over extended periods allowed me to meet several residents, with whom I was able to conduct recorded interviews, as well as engage in a substantial number of informal discussions.

The residence's resident population was composed of only men, most of whom were Soninké and Muslim and hailed from the Senegal River Valley region, in particular from Mali. These residents, aged between 18 and 80, with or without residence permits, for the most part were employees or retirees from the restaurant and construction sectors. The vast majority of those who arrived before 2011, the year when the foyer became a social residence, and so had lived in the former foyer, for more than 40 years for the eldest among them. Their daily practices in the building are thus part of the neighbourhood's routine of life. My research was mainly structured around frequent meetings with residents, and especially with their representatives, who were also residents elected by their peers to bring everyday problems to the attention of the residence management and lead negotiations. I also met on several occasions with the residence's imam, who had officiated there from 2011 to 2016 (the year in which the mosque was shut down), and who although not residing in the residence, came there frequently even outside of prayer hours to visit numerous members of his family who did live there.

Between 2016 and 2020, I was also able to observe the daily work of the residence manager, employed by the management establishment and present on a daily basis, and have several discussions with him, as well as with other occasional workers (social workers and maintenance and technical personnel). This component of the study was complemented with a series of semi-structured interviews, undertaken in 2022 as part of the ReROOT project, with managers of other social residences converted from former migrant worker foyers, aimed at shedding light on their professional practices.

To better understand religious practices and how these have evolved over the past decades, the article also draws on archival research undertaken in the Paris City Archives. In particular, archival documents on the construction of the foyer in the late 1960s and on its conversion in the 2000s were used to highlight the architectural evolution of the building, and especially of the spaces used for religious services. My ethnographic study also allowed me to observe how several local conflicts crystallised around the presence of a mosque within the residence, eventually resulting in the mosque being shut down following a police raid. These events which took place in 2016, and are described in more detail later in the article, allowed me to observe the decisions taken by the Paris Prefecture, the head office of the managing establishment, and an association of neighbours of the foyer organised specifically to close down the place of worship. This ethnographic study is thus based on multiple methods (observation, interviews, and archival research), as well as encounters with a plurality of actors whose interactions will be highlighted throughout the article.

3. Results

This section of the article is structured chronologically to retrace the history of the Parisian foyer's worship space from when it was initially built to the present day.

3.1. From the Establishment of the Foyer to the Mosque Creation: Tolerating Informal Appropriation

During the Second World War, major French towns suffered great destruction from wartime bombing. Post-war, there was an acute shortage of housing that affected almost all social classes. Families, whether French or foreign, lived in insalubrious and over-crowded housing or in furnished hotels situated on the periphery of urban centres, and in particular of Paris, where slums sprung up (Lévy-Vroelant, 2004; Pétonnet, 1985). While unsanitary living conditions were the reality for a majority of people living in France at the time, conditions were particularly bad for low-income and immigrant communities. During the 1950s and 1960s, the cohorts of foreign populations grew due to the action of the French government and large companies who massively recruited workers from abroad, particularly from the French colonies of the day. The opening of borders to workers, moreover, facilitated both their migration and their recruitment. The immigrants rebuilt France while having themselves to put up with extremely precarious living conditions. This context gave rise to migrant worker foyers.

The foyers were built under the impetus of the government, in particular the Ministry of the Interior, and their main objective was the temporary housing of immigrant workers who were considered by these institutions as temporary guests on their territory. The first foyers were built in the late 1950s and were exclusively dedicated to North African workers, in particular Algerians. These foyers were managed by Sonacotra, a company partially run by the state. They offered living spaces organised around units of life, with very small individual rooms, and kitchens and bathrooms that were shared by several residents. The buildings were checked on a daily basis by former colonial military personnel and the practices of residents were strictly regimented to limit political meetings and action (Bernardot, 1997; Hmed, 2006). In effect, until 1962, when the Algerian War ended and Algeria gained its independence, the French government actively limited political action in the metropole and considered foyers as potential spaces for political agitation.

A few years later, a new type of migrant worker foyers emerged, still under state mandate but now managed by non-profit associations and this time dedicated to West African communities, especially communities from the Senegal River Valley region (the border region between Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal). Unlike Algerian immigrants, West African workers were not considered politically dangerous by the public authorities, and the construction of foyers was thus governed by other objectives such as that of maintaining collective life in order to facilitate the migrants' return to their country of origin (Béguin, 2015; Mbodj-Pouye, 2023). The Esperet report presented to public authorities in 1964 spoke of African workers as making few demands with regard to their working conditions, referring to their weak participation in unions and political movements. Thus in 1968, the Paris Prefecture recommended that for West African workers, given that they had a "very rich collective life [that] most of them wished to maintain when abroad, or at least in Paris…foyers should include communal spaces and especially kitchens allowing them to congregate in groups of ten, twenty or thirty, based on affinity" (Préfecture de Paris, 1968, p. 28). The assimilationist project of French integration policies was not yet perceptible here (Favell, 2016), as it was understood that these workers would sooner or later leave.

Thus, in the late 1960s, we can observe the emergence of two types of migrant worker foyers hosting communities divided by geographic origin in different types of buildings. The Parisian foyer of this study has characteristics of foyers referred to as West African by foyer managers and policymakers. It was built in the late 1960s and offered only collective spaces. Unlike other foyers that were old buildings quickly

transformed, the Parisian foyer was constructed from scratch, and thus its spaces were specially designed by architects to meet the needs (or expected needs) of West African migrant workers. Therefore, the basement and ground floor were composed of multipurpose rooms, a café, and external spaces, while the upper floors were divided between dormitories containing four to eight beds, shared showers and toilets, as well as a shared kitchen on each floor with an eating area. The Parisian architecture thus promoted a collective way of life to maintain what policymakers perceived as an African lifestyle. The building designs drawn up in 1968 that are found in the building's construction permit files did not show any spaces for worship, but over the next years, the migrants made the building their own (Lefebvre, 1974). In fact, the foyers produced by the French government quickly became spaces that were appropriated by their residents on a daily basis through the creation of food and arts and crafts markets offering African products, and the development of hosting practices to accommodate young migrants from the diasporas living in those buildings (Daum, 1998; Timera, 1996). Indeed, the foyers offered a space for sleeping, for socialising, and for worship open to all new arrivals whether or not they resided in the foyers, thus playing the role of an arrival infrastructure. The importance of the foyer for the diaspora was reinforced in 1974, the year in which economic borders were closed and an obligatory visa was introduced for entry and settlement on French soil. The foyers, hastily built to temporarily house workers who were supposed to stay just a few years to rebuild France, became perennial living spaces for these migrants whose possibilities for international movement were increasingly restricted by ever stricter legislation.

3.2. From the Growing Problematisation of Islam to the Social Residence

Over the course of decades, foyers became spaces of life and of encounter for the West African diaspora. Former residents who had wished to and managed to bring their families to France continued to go to foyers on weekends to visit friends and family, and also to benefit from activities held there. In fact, the vast collective spaces, conceived by the French institutions to "maintain" the rich "collective life" of West African communities were appropriated by the latter. Informal business activities, as well as craftwork, such as tailoring, shoe repairs, and metalwork, emerged, with products being produced and sold in the large square courtyard of the Parisian foyer or in nearby workshops. In addition, the collective kitchens sold traditional dishes at very low prices throughout the day. These activities turned foyers into central commercial and cultural facilities for the diaspora, providing access to African products in France. This cultural centrality was reinforced by the progressive development of religious activities. Indeed, Parisian inhabitants I interviewed date the establishment of a mosque in the building, within a multipurpose room situated in the basement, to the 1980s. That date coincides with the establishment of other mosques inside foyers observed during the 1970s and 1980s (Kepel, 1991). Indeed, the closure of borders in 1974 expanded the stay of many workers towards longer-term migration, or even made permanent their presence if they took recourse to family reunification. There was thus now a greater need to integrate religion into their lives in France. Given the paucity of mosques in town and the fact that sermons there were delivered in French or Arabic, the biggest collective room in the Parisian foyer was appropriated by inhabitants to create a mosque. Indeed, foyers were then the only space that could offer spaces of worship with sermons in Soninke or Fula, the main languages spoken by migrants from the Senegal River Valley. This language issue was particularly important for recent arrivals who didn't speak French yet. These foyer mosques were thus not just spaces of worship, but also places of intergenerational and diaspora encounter, exchange, and mutual assistance.

Thus, from the first decades, prayer rooms and mosques contributed to turning migrant worker foyers into arrival infrastructures and meeting spaces for people in the neighbourhood. Initially, the emergence of Islam within the confines of the foyer was viewed as a boon by foyer managers who hoped to use the role of control that religion could exert as a "factor of social regulation" (Barou, 1985). Management establishments, influenced by control practices of the colonial period (Bernardot, 1997; Hmed, 2006), thus tried to use older residents and religious leaders to canalise younger residents who infringed foyer by-laws. Furthermore, as Marcel Maussen explained:

> [Foyers managers] were motivated both by the idea that helping immigrants to retain their religion and culture might facilitate their return to the countries of origin, and by the idea that helping Muslims to create and equip elementary religious spaces was not fundamentally different from helping to provide for other socio-cultural needs. (Maussen, 2009, p. 117)

However, during the 1980s and 1990s, religious practices in foyers, as had business, craft, activism, and community activities before that, increasingly diverged in the spatial practices residents adopted from the initial goals set out by managing bodies, and above all from new expectations arising from the shifting politics of those goals during the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, the systemic crises that afflicted the French economy during the 1970s and rising unemployment changed the discourse on the need for immigrant labour. Moreover, the figure of the undocumented migrant—the *sans-papiers*—emerged following the closure of borders, and this fuelled a discourse around the illegality of young migrants. Lastly, within an international context that from the late 1970s was characterised by anxiety and interrogations around Islam, Muslim religious practice progressively entered the public debate and became a political issue (Hajjat & Mohammed, 2013; Kepel, 1991; Maussen, 2009). Thus, during the 1990s, media and political discourse problematised Muslim religious practice, and particularly its visibility in public space. The wearing of distinctive religious signs and open-air prayers increasingly became the focus of debates about Islam in France (Khemilat, 2018). In this transformation of public discourse, the foyer seemed to symbolise a range of public issues through the way it embodied the space simultaneously of Muslim worship, of administrative illegality, and of the presence of now-contested foreign labour.

The presence of informal religious spaces which had been tolerated or even encouraged by foyer managers began to appear problematic to the latter from the 1990s on. Progressively, public authorities and foyer management began to question the very existence of migrant worker foyers. A 1996 parliamentary report, titled the Cuq report after the right-wing deputy who presented it to the National Assembly, in particular cemented the negative image of foyers. In it, foyers were presented as "spaces of lawlessness" (Cuq, 1996, p. 30) and the informality of business, craft, and religious practices as illegal. The tolerance or indifference that institutions had shown towards the spatial appropriation by residents that had characterised earlier decades faded away, and the Cuq report proposed the "dismantlement" (Cuq, 1996, p. 30) of the foyers to "give a strong political signal to French and immigrant public opinion of political will for integration, for rejecting cultural isolation, and for fighting against illegal immigration" (Cuq, 1996, p. 27). In other terms, the Cuq report recommended the formalisation of what could be done and what could not be done within foyers, proposing moreover that the foyers be converted into social residences. In 1997, the Management Plan of Migrant Worker Foyers (*Plan de Traitement des Foyers de Travailleurs Migrants*) enshrined this conversion which was to cover all of the almost 700 foyers in France (Béguin, 2015; Guérin, 2021; Mbodj-Pouye, 2023).

3.3. The Foyer's Conversion, Attempted Formalisation, and the Regimenting of Practices

The Parisian foyer fell under this national plan and was therefore converted into a social residence. Renovation work began in 2008, and in 2011 its residents returned to a completely transformed building. Shared dormitories, bathrooms, and kitchens had disappeared and were now replaced by studio units. And only four multipurpose rooms remained in the building's basement. The conversion was seen by management as a means of "retaking control over the foyer," to borrow the words of one of my interviewees, a building manager. Therefore, the new social residence was not just marked by architectural changes, but also by changes in its by-laws. Usage conventions were introduced in 2011 stipulating what was allowed in the new buildings, set times were designated for activities, and there were rules about who could participate in these. Thus, as explained in the space usage convention, two of the multipurpose rooms were available throughout the week for diverse activities, like recreational activities, informational meetings, literacy classes, worship services, under the responsibility of the association and its president; the other two rooms were only accessible on weekends. By contrast, passageways (entry halls and corridors) were not to be used for any of the above-mentioned activities. The need to have a resident association at the fore derived from the fact that public authorities, under the 1905 law on secularism (*laïcité*), could not finance spaces of worship. Thus, while religious practices could be authorised, they could only be formalised through the intermediation of an association and not directly through the management establishments (which were mostly funded by public authorities).

Nonetheless, the residence's everyday life resumed after the residents returned, and when I entered the Parisian residence in February 2016, I discovered a diversity of uses of its collective spaces, as well as its passageways, which sometimes contravened the terms of the accommodation convention—the *convention de mise à disposition*—which was still in effect. While the multipurpose rooms were still only accessible on the same terms (the entire week for rooms 2 and 4, and only on weekends for rooms 1 and 3), daily practices which in the view of the managers broke the rules of the convention could be observed. First, "common spaces" near the basement rooms were often used for collective prayers, especially on Fridays. No carpets were laid out permanently in these spaces, but given how the room reserved for worship was too small to accommodate the 210 residents who came for prayers, the nearby spaces, spaces of foot traffic, were used by some for prayers. This first infraction to the rules was intensified by the second infraction, particularly problematic for the managers: the use of the spaces of worship by many non-resident worshippers, most of them from nearby neighbourhoods, as the arrondissement where the residence was located did not have any mosque. During prayer hours and on Fridays, the space used for worship expanded beyond the rooms to which worship was supposed to be confined according to the convention, into the corridor outside the basement collective rooms, and even into the central courtyard when the weather was fine.

This informal bending of the rules was possible thanks to relative lenience from the building manager who turned a blind eye, except "when the boss comes," as the building manager often said. He would then ask that the laying of prayer mats be restricted and that the loudspeaker used for the call to prayers be hidden: "You get rid of that for me when head office arrives, ok?" he instructed a resident responsible for the call to prayer, referring to the big loudspeaker set up in the staircase. In 2016, daily adjustments between residents and the manager allowed for the bending of rules and negotiation without "head office" involvement, as well as a certain ambiguity, or even uncertainty about where the line lay between formal and informal. Such negotiation, or encroachment (Bayat, 2010), was visible in how passageways were divvied up and lined with

small plastic cones to mark out a path from the multipurpose rooms to the building exit, thus ensuring that residence workers could move about even during prayer time. The space dedicated to worship was the space outside of the cones. The negotiation between inhabitants and the building manager was then visible spatially in the residence, embodying to what extent informal practices could be tolerated and by whom within the management establishment.

However, during the course of 2016, an increase in management staff presence (from the head office) at the residence, for union meetings or training sessions in rooms 1 and 3 (accessible to residents only on weekends), put management staff face-to-face with residents' infractions. At the same time, a group of neighbours set up an association to mobilise against what they called in a leaflet "noise disturbance" caused by the foyer, taking issue in particular with the crowds of people entering and leaving the building on Fridays, the day of prayers. During the first semester of 2016, the building manager received letters weekly complaining about the residence and its inhabitants from the association of neighbours or sometimes even from local political groups in the municipal opposition. As a consequence, management structure tightened control of the spaces, as did the prefecture, mandated by the former to manage crowds and worshippers coming from outside the residence, and to ensure that security regulations (number of people per room) were respected. On several occasions, the prefecture came to observe and count the number of people coming in and out of the residence on Friday evenings.

3.4. The Post-Attack Context: The Closing of the Multipurpose Rooms and Collective Mobilisation

On Monday, 23 May 2016, a police raid took place in the foyer. I wasn't present at the time and arrived the morning after to visit my interlocutors. About 30 police officers accompanied by dogs had entered the residence for identity checks of its residents. According to the police services quoted by the managers, there were multiple motives for this "operation" including suspicion of trafficking of drugs, arms, and identity papers, as well as suspicion of prostitution taking place inside the residence. The identity checks, carried out in the common space, led to the arrest of about 30 people who did not have their papers in order, and who were held directly at the Administrative Detention Centre. Of the 30 undocumented persons arrested, some were later deported (mainly towards Spain) and others were freed in the month following their arrest, some with an order to leave the French territory, known as an OQTF or *Obligation à Quitter le Territoire Français*. However, the police operation also led to the closure of the four multipurpose rooms, a decision taken immediately and justified by the contraventions to the residence convention and the establishment's security regulations due to the overcrowding in the space of worship. This decision was based on previous prefecture visits on Friday evenings.

Indeed, the presence of worshippers from the neighbourhood seems to have been particularly perceived by the management establishment and public authorities as posing a problem, including for safety reasons as it resulted in large crowds, especially on Fridays. And while negotiation between residents and the building manager had been possible in the daily life they shared, mobilisation by the neighbourhood association and the more frequent presence of "head office" staff in the residence put a spotlight on contraventions to rules, and especially on the informality of such practices. The collective mobilisation against the Parisian space of worship followed a succession of similar actions in the region (Guérin, 2021), and is to be understood in the particular context that followed the 2015 attacks. In the months after the attacks, there was a rise in discourse against the visibility of Muslim religious practices, in particular against open-air prayers (Galonnier,

2021; Khemilat, 2018), and this was mobilised by the local opposition to municipal authorities to establish movements of contestation. The residence and its imam were thus reproached for not having sufficient control and oversight over the worshippers attending the mosque, and suspicions were raised about the presence of "bearded men," a term used by many of the management staff to refer to radicalised individuals. The closure of the multipurpose rooms meant a new phase in the life of the residence and its worship room: that of prohibitions on collective practices of worship. Starting in June 2016, a rent strike was called demanding that the multipurpose rooms be reopened, and that residents be allowed to continue to pray and receive people from the neighbourhood in the residence.

Alongside the collective mobilisation, another conflict emerged among my interlocutors related to semantics. Indeed, the imam, who had been responsible for sermons since the residence opened in 2011, during our interviews spoke of how the worship room was a central part of not just the building's history, but also the history of the neighbourhood: "There has been a mosque here since the 1970s; since the building was built, there has been a mosque." This appeal to history reinforced, of course, his stance as an imam, but also made a case for the space to be opened to the local community and diaspora communities. Indeed, on the multiple occasions when the imam had been reproached by the building manager because of complaints from neighbours or concerns from the prefecture, the imam, seconded by the residents, defended the use of the term "mosque," which according to my field research, implies a reach that goes beyond the simple walls of the residence and offers a visible space of worship to neighbours and the community. On the other hand, the term "mosque," which was used by managers and policymakers in the 1990s, was progressively dropped in the 2000s and 2010s, first in official discourse and then in the everyday language of the residence managers. The rent strike thus had the goal of reopening the space of worship, and also to defend the mosque as a symbol to maintain the residence's openness and its role as an arrival infrastructure. Indeed, ever since the conversion of the foyer into a residence, the sole collective activity that remained and that welcomed non-resident visitors was worship, and in particular the Friday sermons in Soninke and French. In other terms, the space of worship was one of the last remaining places that welcomed worshippers, whether new arrivals or not, and contributed to keeping the building open to its neighbourhood community. The rental strike continued until 2018 and gave rise to multiple negotiations with management in order to find an agreement that would allow the collective rooms to be reopened and the setting out of rules for their use acceptable to all parties.

3.5. "This Is not a Mosque": Accepting to Close to Keep the Power of Decision

As explained, during the closure of the multipurpose rooms, residents and management (accompanied by the neighbours' association and the prefecture) clashed in particular over the use of the word "mosque" and the opening to the wider neighbourhood that the word implied. The word was not used by the managers to refer to the Parisian space of worship; they rather used the term "prayer room" implying thus that it was reserved for residents. This semantic choice in 2016 clashed with that of the imam and the residents' representatives who, for their part, preferred the word "mosque." Nonetheless, during the social movement and strikes of 2016 and 2017, and faced with the slow pace of negotiations, the positions of the representatives shifted and they came to reposition themselves. Indeed, the unequal balance of power, despite a few months of highly attended strikes, pushed the representatives to make concessions in the hope that the rooms would be reopened. Thus, the residents' demands for the reopening of the rooms and the definition of their use progressively shifted:

> If the problem is people from outside, we must then not allow people from outside. He [the imam] now agrees with us, it is to protect the prayer room. (excerpt from an interview with the Parisian chief representative, Parisian residence, March 2018)

> We were wrong before. Now: End the Friday prayers, this is a social residence, it is not a mosque. One must recognise the facts. (excerpt from an interview with a foyer representative, Parisian residence, April 2018)

These two statements from foyer representatives during informal conversations in their respective lodgings illustrate the shift in their position from 2016, when remaining open to non-residents and using the term "mosque" seemed non-negotiable, to 2018, almost two years after the standoff with management started. To "protect," as they said, the space of worship, and above all, to continue to hope it would reopen, it was necessary to declare that doors would be closed to outsiders and thus put at risk the arrival infrastructure that the foyer had represented in the life of the neighbourhood.

This position gained momentum in 2018, when several representatives in other residences started to limit entry to prayer rooms, or even to buildings, during prayer hours to limit crowds and reduce the risk of management taking measures against them. Being accessible to outsiders and large crowds entering and leaving during prayer hours were not new phenomena in 2018; what was new was the hardening of policy by management, as illustrated in the residence case, and it is this that seemed to transform the discourse, as well as the control of spaces of worship by the representatives, as it became necessary to abandon the mosque to "protect" the prayer room. Faced with a growing desire to regiment, or even render invisible, Muslim religious practices in the city, attempts to bend the rules and develop informal worship practices diminished as the balance of power grew in disfavour of the residents. In order to protect other practices also deemed problematic by public authorities and management, such as that of hosting guests in the residence (Guérin, 2022), residents and their representatives accepted the challenge to the religious reception infrastructure side of the foyer so that the foyer could remain a residential reception and arrival infrastructure.

Thus, in 2024, the multipurpose rooms are still closed, rent payments have resumed, and hope for the outcome of the negotiations seems to have died out. Worship practices are now confined to the studio units, and the collective dimension, particularly important during the month of Ramadan, is only observed between people sharing the same studio or individuals with close ties.

4. Conclusions

By retracing the history of a Parisian foyer and its space of worship, this article has attempted to shed light on the sequence of steps that worship practices have navigated between tolerated informality and attempts at formalisation by management, followed by daily informal infringements, before being totally prohibited. Beyond the fluctuations, the analysis of the tensions between formal and informal practices also informs us about the actors, the spaces, and above all the contexts of worship practices. While it is true that the renovated buildings of the social residences provided less space for worship, it was mainly the progressive construction of public debate around the visibility of Islam in the city that led to the elimination of the residence's common spaces. The history retraced in the article shows how the room for manoeuvre for residents to produce informal practices to maintain a worship space, and consequently the arrival

infrastructure that the foyer represented, was reduced. It also raises the question of what happens when arrival infrastructure is closed or its resources transformed. What happens to the infrastructure as a whole when one dimension disappears?

Through this analysis of a religious space, we can highlight the progressive transformation of the openness of the foyer and its role as an arrival infrastructure. Indeed, the reduction of the space available for religious practice and the evolution of the words used to describe such practice over the decades shed light on the transformation of the role bestowed on the foyer (and later social residence) by the government and the managers. From temporal community-based housing facilities for temporal migrants to representing parts of the city that concentrated a large number of problematic issues. This chronology aims to highlight how the evolution from tolerated informality to prohibition explains the history of the Parisian religious space, and more generally the relation between the French government and its postcolonial migrant workers. Through the lens of (in)formality, this case study shows how the status of a practice is produced by the political response it receives. In other words, religious practices didn't change per se (praying together in collective rooms) but the political context progressively changed and shifted its discourses on the practices. From being tolerated, they became informal and then prohibited.

On a more theoretical level, this article aims to contribute to the arrival infrastructure literature by shedding light on the key role of the socio-historical perspective not only to grasp the dynamics of slow transformations but also to better understand the ethnographic context of fieldwork. It participates in a broader discussion on the importance of historical approaches in arrival infrastructure research which seems fruitful for discourse analysis as well as for material aspects of the infrastructure such as architecture (Räuchle, 2019). More generally, this article wanted to highlight how the ethnographic study of spaces and their materiality can illustrate and help us seize the broader dynamics at stake, complexifying what can be understood through the concept of *laïcité* (secularism) in the French context. By analysing the local regulation of religious practices, this article shows how the actors deal with the concept of *laïcité* in situ. This general concept, which is used to define the distance between French politics and religious institutions, is questioned in this very specific context allowing us to see its blurred frontiers (local negotiation, spatial accommodation).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality.

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