



The Interplay Between Religion, Traditional Beliefs, and Socio-Economic Development: Insights from Four Emerging Economies

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between traditional beliefs, socio-economic development, and religion in four emerging economies: Benin, Indonesia, Tanzania, and Togo. The study addresses gaps in existing literature, which has not conclusively determined whether and to what extent socio-economic development reduces the prevalence of traditional beliefs. Additionally, the interplay between religion and traditional beliefs remains debated, with some studies suggesting coexistence while others highlight inherent conflicts. The findings reveal that the impact of socio-economic development on traditional beliefs varies significantly across different types of beliefs. From an Islamic law perspective, practices such as witchcraft and superstition are condemned as shirk (polytheism) for diverting reliance away from Allah. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and principles like *maqasid al-shariah* (objectives of Sharia) provide frameworks to counter these practices by promoting rationality, education, and monotheism. In Indonesia, for instance, Islamic principles have allowed traditional healing practices to coexist with modernity within an ethical framework aligned with Sharia. Conversely, in regions with smaller Muslim populations, such as Benin and Togo, traditional beliefs remain widespread and are often intertwined with animism and other non-Islamic faiths. The study also finds that religious demography significantly influences the persistence of some traditional beliefs but not others. Finally, it highlights a strong correlation between the popularity of traditional beliefs and the prominence of traditional religions within societies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, attention has been paid to the political consequences of traditional beliefs (Baris & Pelizzo, 2023; Pelizzo, 2024). Studies conducted in this line of research have paid some attention to the way in which traditional beliefs can be conceptualized and operationalized, to the correlation between traditional beliefs and modernization (Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev, 2023a), as well as to the political consequences of traditional beliefs (and practices).

The studies produced by Gershman (2016) have shown that the pervasiveness of witchcraft beliefs, which are a sub-set of traditional beliefs, is associated with lower levels of trust, with a higher percentage of respondents believing in the importance of religion (Gershman, 2023b), with the prevalence of poor economic conditions (Gershman, 2022, 2023a, 2023b) and with a culture that does not value individualism and self-expression (Gershman, 2022).

Witchcraft beliefs, however important, are just one aspect or manifestation of traditional beliefs. The traditional mindset of an individual and, in the aggregate, the traditional culture of a society also reflects other beliefs (such as, for example, the belief in superstition, in the evil eye, in the importance of talisman, and so on) as well as other practices.

What the recent and rapidly growing literature on traditional beliefs has been able to show is that these traditional beliefs affect a wide range of social and political behaviors and phenomena. Tubadji (2022) showed, in this regard, that individuals self-identifying as witches were more likely to support Brexit; Harakan et al. (2023) showed that Indonesian voters with a traditional mindset are more likely to vote for a government party; while Pelizzo et al. (2023) showed that in several African countries voters' electoral choices are shaped by whether they have a traditional mindset. The pervasiveness of traditional beliefs (and practices) in a society and individuals' beliefs in the various manifestations of tradition have several political implications in addition to shaping electoral behavior and electoral results. Attitudes towards democratic rule Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev (2023b), and autocratic rulers (Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev, 2023a) are shaped by traditional beliefs. Furthermore, recent studies have consistently reported that individuals with a traditional mindset are remarkably more likely to believe in conspiracy theories and, vice versa, individuals who believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to have a traditional mindset and to hold on to traditional beliefs (Kinyondo et al., 2024).

While this body of research has consistently shown that traditional beliefs (and practices) matter as they have clear social and political implications, there has been somewhat less agreement as to whether and how traditional beliefs relate to religiosity and to whether and how they relate to socio-economic development. Regarding the relationship between religiosity and traditional mindset, (Gershman, 2023a) has shown that the pervasiveness of traditional beliefs and the pervasiveness of religiosity go hand in hand. In contrast, the analysis of German survey data performed by Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev (2023a) has made it quite clear that the political consequences of traditional beliefs are antithetical to the political consequences of religion. With regard to the relationship between traditional beliefs, the picture is also somewhat unclear because while Gershman (2023b) and, to some extent, Pelizzo, Turganov, et al. (2023) showed that the pervasiveness of traditional beliefs seems to be negatively related to the level of socio-economic development of a country, other studies have shown instead that traditional beliefs became more

popular as countries made progress along the developmental path (Harakan et al., 2023; Rusliadi et al., 2024; Sarbagishev & Dyussenov, 2020).

From an Islamic law perspective, traditional beliefs such as witchcraft, superstition, and the evil eye have been subjects of significant attention. The Qur'an explicitly condemns witchcraft, describing it as harmful and misleading (Al-Baqarah 2:102), and emphasizes reliance on Allah over superstitions (Al-Jinn 72:6). Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) categorizes practices like sorcery and magic as acts of *shirk* (polytheism) because they attribute power to entities other than Allah (Mustafa Muhamed et al., 2019). The *hadith* literature also further reinforces this prohibition, with Prophet Muhammad stating.

Despite these prohibitions, traditional beliefs often persist in Muslim-majority societies. In Indonesia, for instance, contemporary societal shifts have witnessed the coexistence of Islamic resurgence with enduring traditional practices like *dukun* (shamanism) and *pelet* (love spells), which many communities still rely on for healing or resolving personal issues. Some parties concerned with the case have approached these practices critically, advocating for *dakwah* (Islamic propagation) to educate communities on the dangers of such beliefs while offering Sharia-compliant alternatives, such as *ruqyah* (spiritual healing with Qur'anic recitation) (Oparin, 2020).

Islamic law provides a framework for addressing these challenges through principles like *maqasid al-shariah* (objectives of Sharia), which prioritize preserving faith (*din*), life (*nafsi*), intellect (*aqi*), lineage (*nasl*), and wealth (*maal*). For instance, the principle of preserving intellect aligns with the promotion of rational thinking and scientific inquiry, countering the influence of superstition and magic (Kamali, 2008). Similarly, the emphasis on public welfare (*maslahah*) enables Islamic legal systems to tackle harmful traditional practices by integrating education and modern socio-economic strategies (Auda, 2022).

The purpose of the present article is to explore the relationship between traditional beliefs, socio-economic development, and religion. To do so we will perform macro-level analyses with the survey data originally employed by (Harakan et al., 2023; Pelizzo, Turganov, et al., 2023).

2. METHODS

The survey data employed in this paper were collected in Benin, Indonesia, Tanzania and Togo. The reason why these countries were included in the analysis is that, while they can all be regarded as developing countries, they also differ significantly in terms of wealth and demographic characteristics. The most important of which is the religious affiliation of the population. In Indonesia 87.1 per cent of the population is Muslim, in Tanzania 35.2 per cent of the population believes in Islam, in Benin only 27.2 per cent of the population is Muslim, while in Togo 18.4 per cent of the population is Muslim. This means that this sample provides, in terms of religious affiliation, considerable variation and it provides a perfect setting to assess how socio-economic development and traditional beliefs interact. Preliminary analyses of those papers were presented in previous studies (Harakan et al., 2023; Pelizzo, Turganov, et al., 2023). In the course of the present paper we will present descriptive statistics (Table 1 and table 2) and scatterplots. We decided to rely upon scatterplots instead of running correlations because the sample that will be used for our analysis is rather small (N =4).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In his classic work, Frazer (1907) noted that cultures and societies go through distinct phases: a magic phase at first, a religious phase then, and, finally, a scientific/rational phase. Durkheim was not persuaded that science would replace religion in the same way in which religion had replaced magic (Durkheim, 2016). Yet, while not entirely in agreement with Frazer's theorizing Durkheim agreed though that religion and magic were two different things. Specifically, as Launay (2022) recently observed "Magic (...) neither depends on nor creates a moral community; a magician has a clientele, not a Church". This very important scholarly tradition posits that magic and religion are two different phenomena. If this tradition is correct in assuming or postulating that religion and magic are essentially different from one another, one should then conclude that in societies characterized by higher levels of religiosity, magic and/or witchcraft beliefs should be less popular than in societies characterized by lower levels of religion/religiosity and by a greater popularity to pre-religious sets of beliefs.

Moreover, within the realm of modernization theory, which spans from the foundational works of Marx and Weber to the contemporary insights of scholars like Inglehart and his associates, there has existed a persistent assertion that cultural transformations are intricately linked to the socio-economic evolution of societies (Inglehart & Welzel, 2001, 2009). According to this theoretical framework, cultural shifts, such as the progression from a magical to a religious phase, and subsequently to secularism, are believed to be contingent upon the broader socio-economic changes within a society. This perspective delineates a linear causal pathway: *firstly*, the process of socio-economic development facilitates the fulfillment of individuals' basic needs; *secondly*, individuals socialized in more advanced societies exhibit distinct values and attitudes compared to those from less developed environments; *thirdly*, socio-economic advancement engenders a cultural metamorphosis, characterized by a transition from materialist to emancipative values and a shift from heightened religiosity to increased secularism. Consequently, one would logically infer that the socio-economic development of a society should coincide with the gradual erosion of traditional beliefs, including witchcraft, which are emblematic of a conventional mindset.

It is thus anticipated that as societies progress economically and socially, traditional beliefs, such as those associated with witchcraft, would gradually dissipate. This expectation stems from the premise that as individuals' material needs are met and their worldview shifts towards more emancipative values, the influence of traditional superstitions diminishes. Consequently, the disappearance of witchcraft beliefs would be seen as a natural consequence of societal modernization, reflecting a broader trend towards secularism and rationality. However, despite the intuitive logic of this argument, empirical evidence suggests a more nuanced relationship between socio-economic development and the persistence of traditional beliefs.

Compelling as this line of thinking may be, it is not entirely correct. Several studies have shown that traditional beliefs are still rather common among fairly large portions of the population both in developing and developed countries. Gershman (2022) reported that witchcraft beliefs can be detected nearly in the whole world and that in some countries are still rather pervasive. Gershman (2022) specifically noted that the witchcraft beliefs exist everywhere "varying from 9% in Sweden to 90% in Tunisia, with a mean of 43%". Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev (2023a) reported that traditional beliefs, such as superstition, are still rather common in Germany. This evidence sustains the claim

that the process of socio-economic development has not eradicated traditional and witchcraft beliefs even in industrially advanced societies.

Second, the process of socio-economic development has led to a cultural shift in the sense that emancipative values have become more common (and materialist values have become less common) than they once were, but it has not managed to reduce the levels of religiosity. As Norris & Inglehart (2004) noted, the main tenets of secularization theory had to be revised because the world has not become, contrary to earlier forecasts, secular. Countries and people have remained religious, and, in some cases/instances, some countries have become more religious than they had been in previous years and decades (Kuzenbayev & Pelizzo, 2023). Indonesia and Kazakhstan are two obvious cases in point. Indonesia, in the wake of the Orde Baru, has become more religious. Similarly, Kazakhstan has become a more religious society than it was under the Soviet rule.

Third, and in contrast to what Frazer and his followers had claimed, religion was not displaced by scientific rationality, religion did not displace magic and witchcraft beliefs, and scientific rationality did not displace magic and witchcraft beliefs. There are two basic reasons why this was indeed the case. The first reason is that, in some cases, the (growing) popularity of traditional and witchcraft beliefs are a reaction against the rational-scientific mode of thinking—which means that as the rational-scientific mode of thinking becomes more popular, the reaction against it also intensifies and traditional beliefs gain wider currency. The second reason is that, in some societies, religion and magic are intimately intertwined. In this regard, the words of Mbiti (1971) are clear. Mbiti (1971) noted that “a careful examination of the situation in African societies shows that magic is part of the religious background (...) some of the ceremonies (...) incorporate both religion and magic”. Furthermore, even though he noted that “religion is greater than magic” (Mbiti, 1971), Mbiti (1971) was unequivocal about the fact that “magic belongs to the religious mentality of African people”.

The studies reviewed end up painting a rather confusing picture in the sense that it is not clear what the relationship is between traditional (and witchcraft) beliefs on the one hand and religion on the other hand. It is also not clear from what the literature has shown whether (and how) socio-economic development affects the presence and pervasiveness of traditional beliefs. In the remainder of the paper, we will try to show how traditional beliefs relate to religion and socio-economic development.

Some Findings on Traditional Beliefs

In their analysis of the relationship between development indicators and the diffusion of traditional beliefs and practices, (Pelizzo, Turganov, et al., 2023) showed that the use of traditional healers was strongly and significantly related to 5 of the 6 development indicators used in the article. The percentage of the population making use of traditional healers was in fact strongly, significantly, and negatively correlated with GNI per capita, with Life Expectancy, with the percentage of the population living in urban areas, while it was strongly, positively, and significantly related to infant mortality and to the percentage of the population working in the agricultural sector. The analysis also revealed that there is no statistically significant relationship between literacy rate and the percentage of the population going to traditional healers. The percentage of respondents reporting to have witnessed exorcism was strongly and significantly related to literacy rate and to the percentage of the population working in agriculture. The larger the portion of the population working in agriculture, the higher the percentage of people reporting to have witnessed

exorcism, whereas the higher the literacy rate, the lower the percentage of people reporting to have witnessed exorcism. The percentage of respondents believing in jinns and the percentage of respondents claiming to have seen jinn were both strongly, significantly, and negatively related to the literacy rate.

Lipset (1959) famously noted that socio-economic development can be measured on the basis of wealth (income per capita), urbanization, industrialization and education. More recent studies (Kaufmann et al., 1999) also measure development on the basis of infant mortality and average life expectancy. In our analyses we employ both sets of development indicators to gather a more nuanced understanding not only of the extent to which the countries included in the sample have developed but also to develop a finer understanding of how development and traditional beliefs relate to each other.

Interesting, while socio-economic indicators such as GNI per capita, literacy rate, life expectancy, infant mortality, urbanization, and employment in agriculture are related to some traditional beliefs and practices, the diffusion of other traditional beliefs and practices is unrelated to whether and how much a country has made some progress along the developmental path.

This result could be explained by the fact that traditional mindset is not a homogeneous entity in the sense that holding a traditional belief does not provide any indication as to whether a respondent also holds another traditional belief. At the society level the popularity of a belief does not necessarily go hand in hand with the popularity of another belief. In fact, in this regard, Pelizzo, Turganov, et al. (2023) reported that the percentage of respondents reporting to believe in witchcraft, evil eye and jinns was respectively 36.3, 53.8 and 54 per cent respectively. Furthermore, they showed that while the percentage of respondents who believed in witchcraft was strongly, positively, and significantly associated with the percentage of respondents who believe in evil eye and in jinns, there was no detectable relationship between the percentage of respondents who believed in evil eye and the percentage of respondents who believe in jinns (Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev, 2023a).

Furthermore, the popularity of traditional practices varied considerably and the popularity of a traditional practice was generally unrelated to the popularity of other practices. The percentage of respondents going to traditional healers was not related to the percentage of respondents who use objects against the evil eye, who wear talismans, who have witnessed an exorcism or have seen a *jinn* (Pelizzo, Turganov, et al., 2023).

Our analysis of the relationship between various types of traditional beliefs and practices reveals that most of them are unrelated to one another and that only some of them are in a detectable relationship. Even more perplexing, albeit consistent with the findings presented in previous studies, is the fact that the popularity of some traditional beliefs and/or practices is negatively related to the popularity of other traditional beliefs and practices. If we correlate, for instance, the percentage of respondents who believe in the evil eye with the percentage of respondents who claim to have witnessed an exorcism, we find that two variables are negatively related to one another. In countries where a larger percentage of respondents believe in the evil eye, a lower percentage of respondents has witnessed an exorcism, while in countries in which the belief in the

evil eye is less common a higher portion of the population claims to have witnessed an exorcism. See Figure 1.

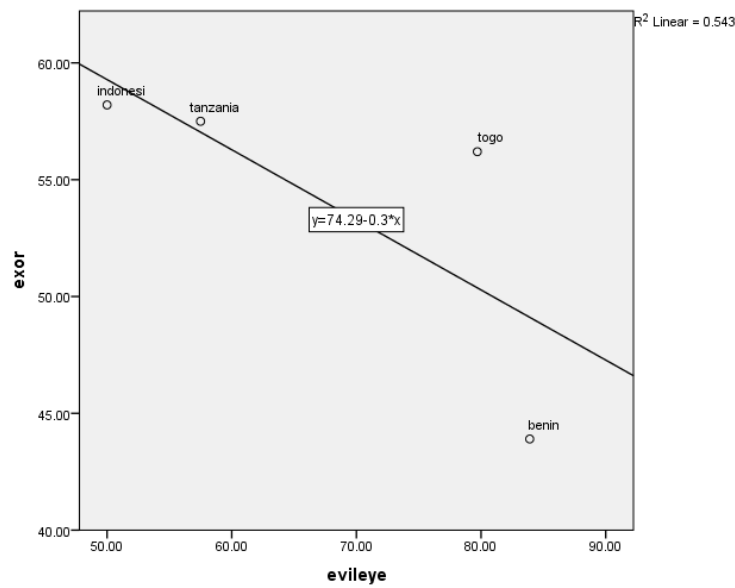


Figure 1. Belief in the Evil Eye and Witnessing an Exorcism

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

Similarly, once we correlate the percentage of respondents who believe in the evil eye with the percentage of respondents who have gone to traditional healers, we find that the correlation is negative. This means that in countries where a larger portion of the population believes in the evil eye, a lower portion of the population goes to the traditional healers, whereas in countries where a smaller portion of the population believes in the evil eye, a larger portion of the population seeks medical treatment from traditional healers. See Figure 2.

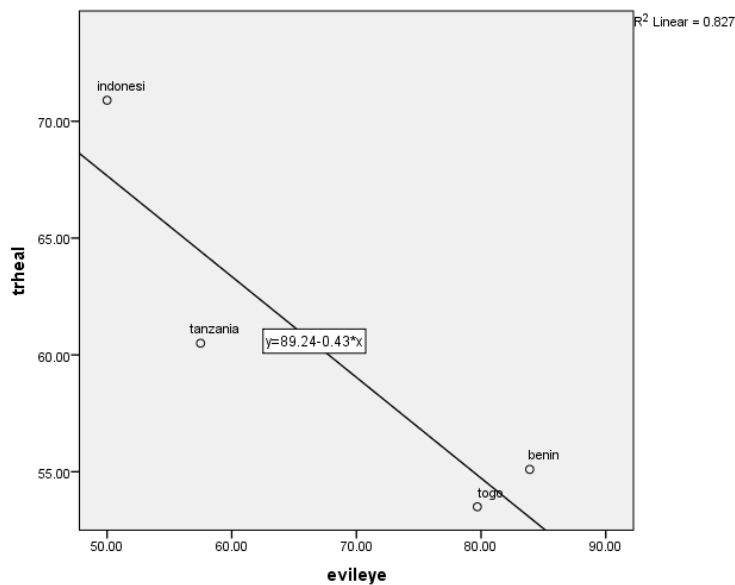


Figure 2. Traditional Healers and Evil Eye Beliefs

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

By contrast, the percentage of respondents who claim to have witnessed an exorcism is positively related to the percentage of respondents who believe in (the existence of) witchcraft. In fact, visual inspection of Figure 3 reveals that in countries where a larger portion of respondents believes (in the existence of) witchcraft, there is a larger percentage of respondents who claims to have witnessed an exorcism, whereas in countries where a relatively small portion of the population believes in witchcraft, only a small portion of the respondents has witnessed an exorcism.

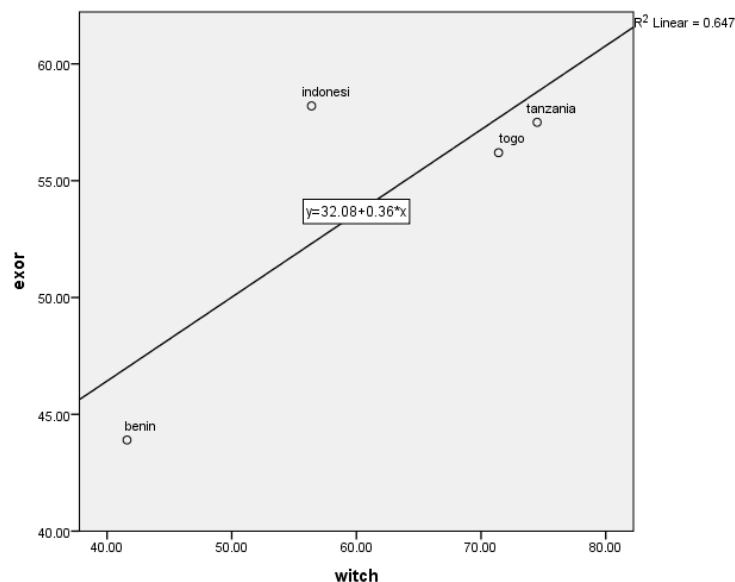


Figure 3. Witchcraft and Exorcism

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

These findings corroborate in some way the findings presented by Pelizzo, Turganov, et al, (2023) as they show that the traditional mindset is complex, multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and that not all these traditional traits go hand in hand. In another respect, however, the findings presented here depart in some significant ways from earlier findings as evidence by the fact that while Pelizzo, Turganov, et al. (2023) reported a strong linear relationship between the percentage of respondents who believe in witchcraft and the percentage of those who believe in the evil eye, what we find instead is that the relationship is curvilinear at best—see Figure 4.

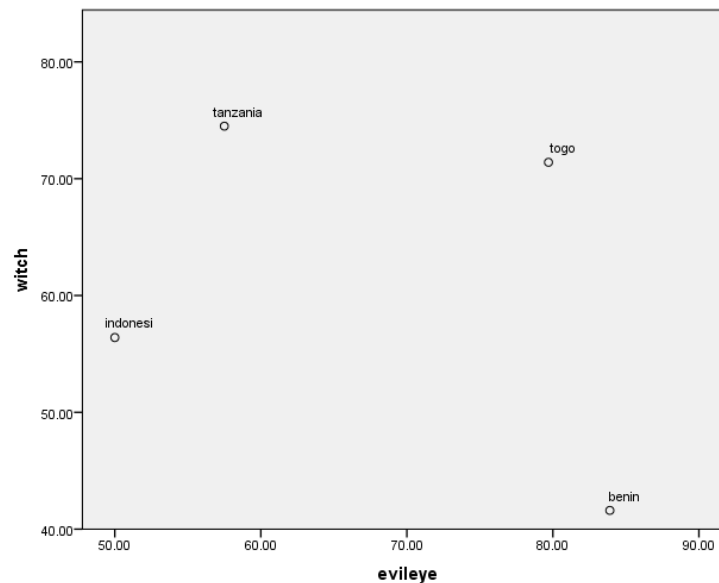


Figure 4. Evil eye and Witchcraft

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

Traditional Beliefs and Development Indicators

Previous studies pointed out that traditional beliefs are less popular in developed countries than in developing ones. Modernization theory has traditionally explained this finding by pointing out that as a society becomes more affluent, more literate, more urbanized, more industrialized, and more developed, the values of society undergo a process of transformation. The literature has however noted that the impact of socio-economic development on the transformation of values is not automatic, is not straightforward, and it is not linear.

The findings presented by Pelizzo, Turganov, et al. (2023) sustain that claim. The popularity of certain traditional beliefs and/or practices is affected by the level of socio-economic development of the country. Specifically, previous studies revealed that the percentage of respondents who claim to have witnessed an exorcism is positively related to the percentage of the population working in the agricultural sector and negatively related to the country's literacy rate. The percentage of respondents who consult Traditional Healers is positively and significantly related to the percentage of the population working in agriculture and to the infant mortality rate, while it is negatively related to GNI per capita, Life Expectancy and percentage of the population living in urban areas. In other words, people who live in more developed countries, no matter how development is actually assessed, are less likely to go to Traditional Healers than people who live in less developed settings.

The data at our disposal paint a slightly different picture. In our sample, the popularity of traditional healers or the percentage of the population who consult traditional healers is higher in more developed countries than in less developed ones. The percentage of respondents who consult traditional healers in fact is higher in countries with higher GNI per capita, higher literacy rate, higher life expectancy and lower infant mortality. See Figures 5.

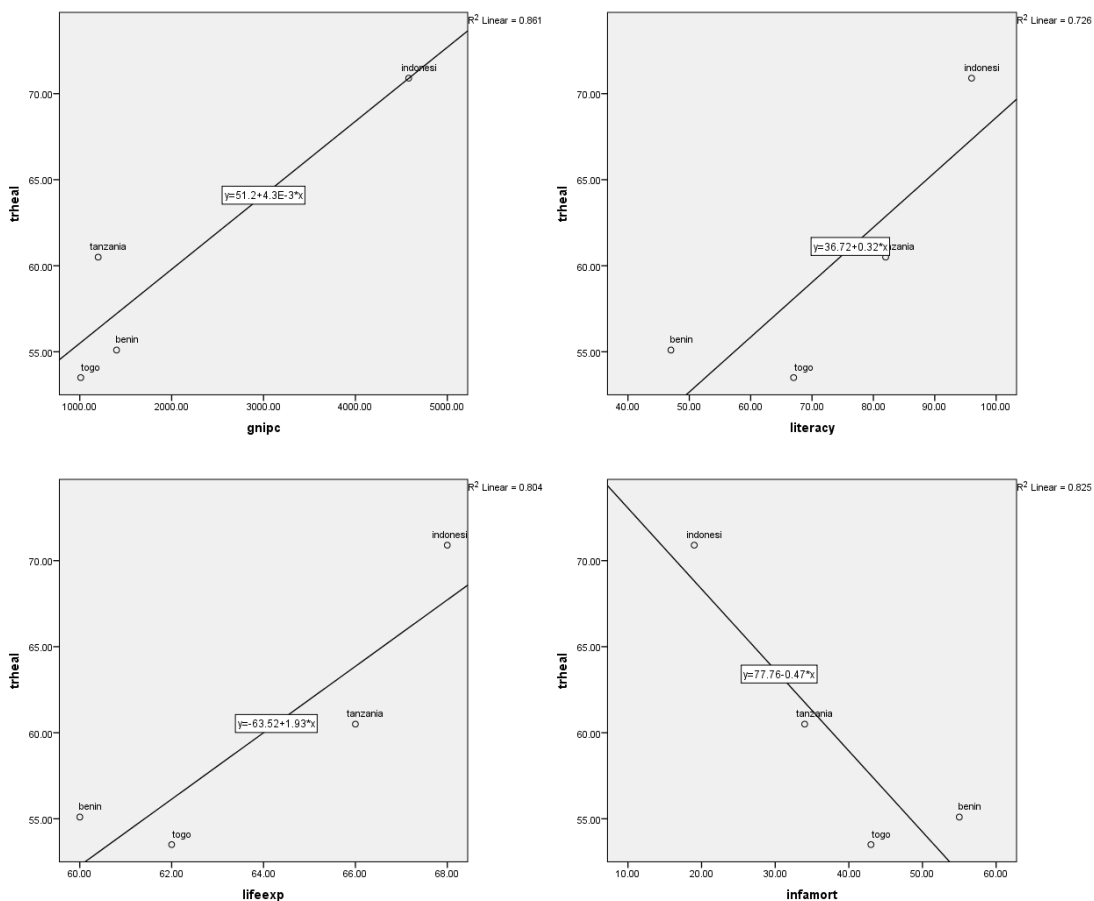
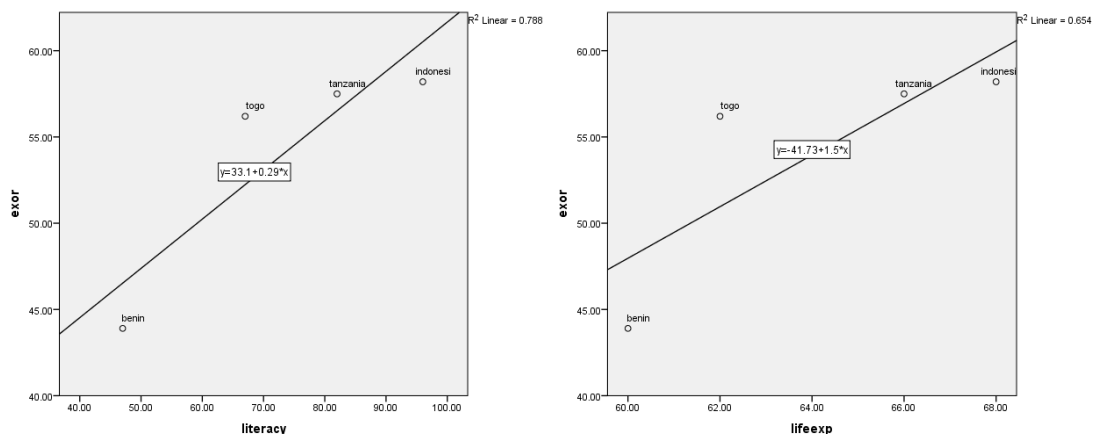


Figure 5. Traditional Healers and Development Indicators

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

The percentage of respondents who claim to have witnessed an exorcism is positively related to literacy rate and life expectancy, while it is negatively related to infant mortality. In other words, the percentage of respondents who witness exorcisms is higher in more developed countries than in less developed ones—see Figure 6.



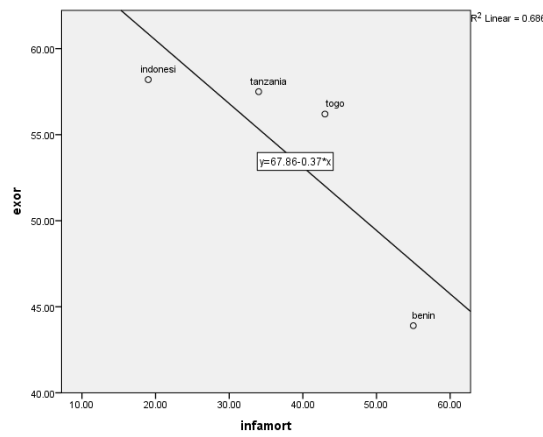
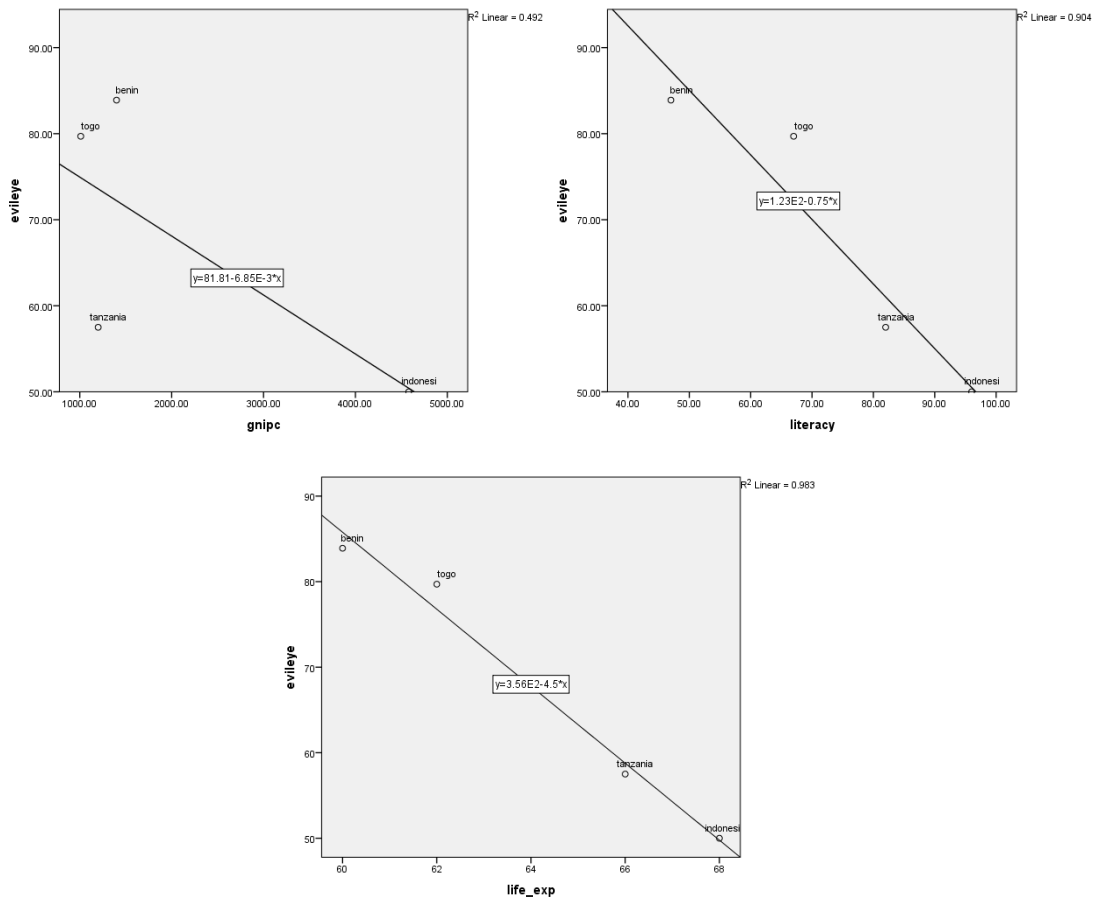


Figure 6. Exorcism and Development Indicators

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

Only the percentage of respondents who believe in the evil eye is a function of development in the sense that the percentage of respondents who hold such a traditional belief is lower in more developed settings and higher in less developed ones. Visual inspection of figure 7 reveals that in countries with higher GNI per capita, higher literacy rate, higher life expectancy and lower infant mortality, the percentage of the population who believes in the evil eye is lower. By contrast in countries that are less developed, the percentage of the population who believes in the evil eye is higher. See Figure 7.



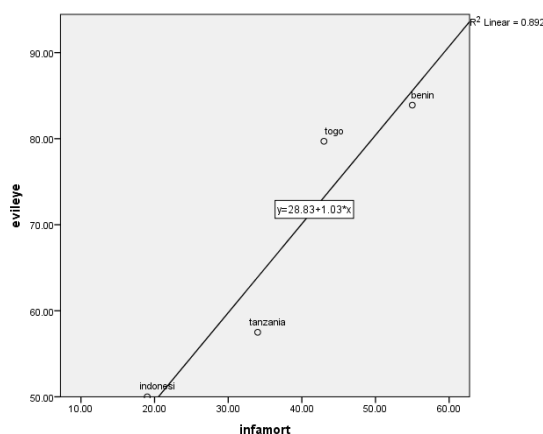


Figure 7. Socio-economic Development and Traditional Beliefs

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

Two additional points need be addressed here, namely which aspects of development have a more transformative impact on the traditional mindset of a society and, second, which aspects of a traditional mindset are more likely to change as a society makes progress along the developmental path. Literacy and Average Life Expectancy are the development indicators that are more likely to induce a change in people's mindset. In the second respect, while some traditional beliefs (witchcraft) and practices (exorcism) are not significantly affected by a society's process of socio-economic transformation, the belief in the evil eye and the use of traditional healers are both influenced by a society's developmental progress. Finally of all the traditional beliefs, the belief in the evil eye is the most likely to change when a society becomes more developed.

Discussion

The findings presented in the previous section are inconsistent with the findings presented by Pelizzo, Turganov, et al. (2023). In this section we will explore some possible reasons why there is such an inconsistency.

The first reason why there is an inconsistency in the findings is that the sample used in this study is different from the sample used by Pelizzo, Turganov, et al. (2023). In their analysis of superstition, modernization and value change, Pelizzo, Turganov and Kuzenbayev used the survey data collected by Pew Research Institute from among 26 Muslim communities. In the present paper, we used survey data collected from only 4 countries (Benin, Indonesia, Tanzania, Togo).

The second reasons are that our sample is different from what Pelizzo, Turganov, et al. (2023) employed not only because it is smaller but also because three of the countries included in our sample (Benin, Tanzania, Togo) were not included in the database of the Pew Research Institute and, except for Indonesia, we did not include any of the countries included in the data collection conducted by the Pew Research Institute.

The third reason is that the respondents participating in the survey administered by the Pew Research Institute were all Muslim, while in our sample there is some considerable cross-national variation in the percentage of Muslim respondents participating in the survey. To be more precise, 100 per cent of the Indonesian respondents participating in the survey used by Harakan et al.

(2023), Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev (2023a) were Muslim, while in Sub-Saharan countries the percentage of Muslim respondents was considerably lower: 58.5 per cent of Tanzanian respondents were Muslim, 15 per cent of the Togolese respondents were Muslim and in Benin 7.94 per cent of the respondents in Benin were Muslim.

Islam was the most common religion among Indonesian and Tanzanian respondents, while Christianity was the most common religion in Benin and Togo. Benin and Togo also had a sizeable portion of Catholics and in Benin self-identified Voodoo believers, members of the Celeste Church and members of the Evangelical Church represented more than 20 per cent of the respondents included in the study.

Table 1. Religions and Respondents

Religions	Indonesia	Tanzania	Togo	Benin
Islam	100	58.5	15.03	7.94
Christian	0	41.5	62.7	40.2
Catholic	0	0	8.29	27.5
Animist	0	0	1.56	0.53
Voodoo	0	0	1.56	6.88
Celeste	0	0	0.52	6.88
Evangelique	0	0	0	6.88
Other	0	0	10.34	3.19
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

Given the considerable variation in the religious demography of the countries included in the present study, it is worth exploring whether and to what extent the variance in the pervasiveness or popularity of traditional beliefs is a function of the religious demography of each of the countries included in this study. To explore whether this is indeed the case, we explore the relationship between the percentage of Muslim respondents in each of the four countries included in the study.

By doing so we find that religion, in the sense of religious demography, matters. The popularity of evil eye belief is negatively related to the percentage of the population who believes in Islam. The belief in the evil is most common in Benin and Togo, where only a relatively small percentage of respondents is Muslim, and it is least common among Indonesian respondents who were all Muslim. The popularity of the evil eye belief among Tanzanian respondents was higher than Indonesia, but substantially lower than in Togo and Benin (see figure 8).

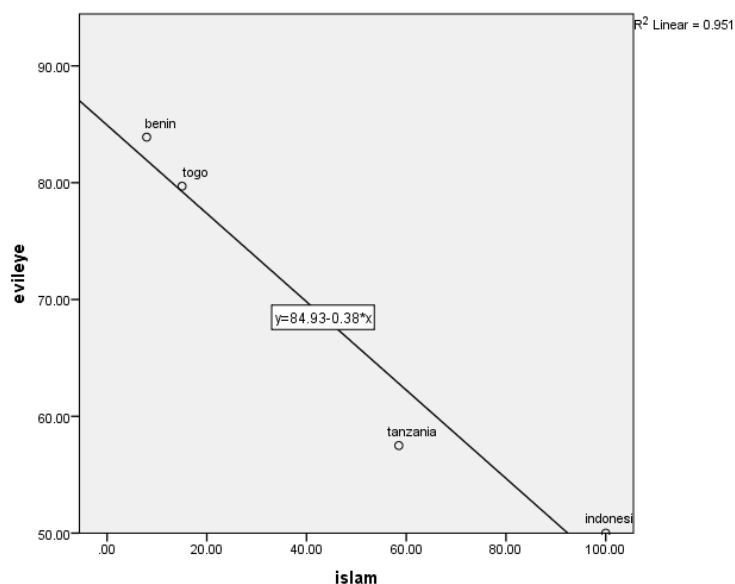


Figure 8. Evil Eye Beliefs and Islam

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

While the pervasiveness of Islam and the pervasiveness of the evil eye belief are at odds with one another, our data analysis reveals (see figure 9) that the popularity of Traditional Healers is strongly and positively related to the percentage of Muslim respondents in our sample. The percentage of respondents who go to and/or employ the services of Traditional Healers is lower in countries in which only a small portion of the population embraces the Islamic faith, such as in the case of Benin and Togo, whereas it is higher in countries such as Indonesia where a larger portion of the population is Muslim and it is even higher in among Indonesian respondents who are all Muslim.

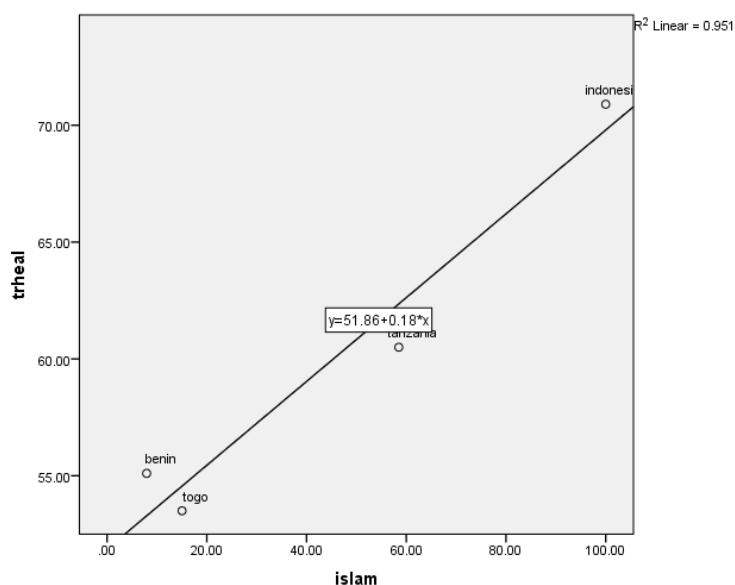


Figure 9. Islam and Traditional Healers

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

Finally, the data at our disposal reveal that the percentage of respondents who claim to have witnessed an exorcism is higher in countries in which a larger portion of the population is Muslim and it is smaller in countries in which a smaller portion of the population has embraced Islam. See Figure 10.

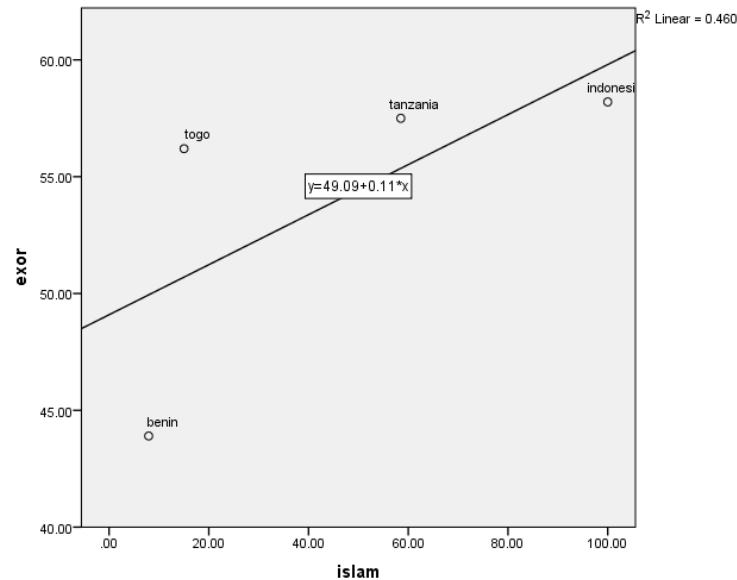


Figure 10. Islam and Exorcism

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

This evidence indicates that religion matters. While previous studies by Gershman (2016) had claimed that the propensity to hold on to traditional beliefs was a function of religiosity in the sense that more religious people are more likely to believe in traditional beliefs, the data that we have presented here make it clear that what matters is not so much how religious one respondent is but what religion/faith he/she belongs to.

The data at our disposal do not give us the opportunity to explore whether and to what extent religiosity -how religious one is – affects one person’s propensity to have traditional beliefs. But there is one final analysis that we can perform to explore the relationship between traditional beliefs and traditional religion.

Respondents from Benin, Indonesia, Tanzania and Togo were asked whether they had witnessed an exorcism, whether they believed in the evil eye, whether they believed in witchcraft, whether they went to traditional healers. As we have seen above some of these traditional beliefs and practices go hand in hand with one another and some don’t. They do, however, all uncover one specific facet of a traditional mindset. Going to traditional healers may be a function of a respondent’s well-being and of a country’s development -a poor person cannot afford to go to a hospital and a poor country does not have many hospitals – but it is also a function of whether and to what extent one believes traditional medicine to be preferable to modern medicine—and in so far as going to Traditional Healers reveals and reflects a preference for traditional medicine over modern one, going to Traditional Healers does indicate one person’s traditional mindset. The belief in the evil eye, superstition, and the belief in witchcraft are indicative of a pre-modern, pre-

rational, non-scientific mode of thinking which is typical of individuals who have a traditional mindset. Similarly, claiming to have witnessed an exorcism or to have seen spirits being driven out of one person is indicative of a pre-modern, traditional mindset.

By adding the percentages of respondents and then dividing the result so obtained by the number of categories of responses, we can create an index of traditional mindset. This index varies from a minimum of 56.13 in the case of Benin to a maximum of 65.2 in Togo, with Indonesia and Tanzania taking in between values. See table 2.

Table 2. Index of Traditional Mindset

	A	B	C	D	
	Percentag e of respondents who witnessed an exorcism	Percentag e of respondents who believe in the evil eye	Percentag e of respondents who believe in witchcraft	Percentag e of respondents who go to Traditional Healers	Total (A+B+C+D)/ 4
Benin	43.9	83.9	41.6	55.1	56.13
Indonesi a	58.2	50	56.4	70.9	58.88
Tanzania	57.5	57.5	74.5	60.5	62.50
Togo	56.2	79.7	71.4	53.5	65.20

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

To assess whether the traditional mindset relates with the pervasiveness of traditional religiosity, we scatterplot the index that we have just constructed with the percentage of respondents who, in each country, claim to know someone who believes in a traditional religion (animism, voodoo, and so on). The scatterplot presented in Figure 11 portrays the relationship between the percentage of respondents who are Muslim in each of the four countries where data were collected and the Traditional Mindset score recorded in each of those countries. Visual inspection of the scatterplot reveals that the two variables are orthogonal to one another, which means that changes or variation in the values of one of those variables is unrelated to changes or variation in the values of the other variable. Countries with larger Muslim population are not more traditionally-minded than societies with smaller Muslim communities. Furthermore, the visual inspection of Figure 11 suggests that the case of Benin is a sort of outlier. The implication is that if one were to remove Benin from the analysis, one would then detect a clear, strong, negative association between the percentage of Muslim population and the pervasiveness of a traditional mindset.

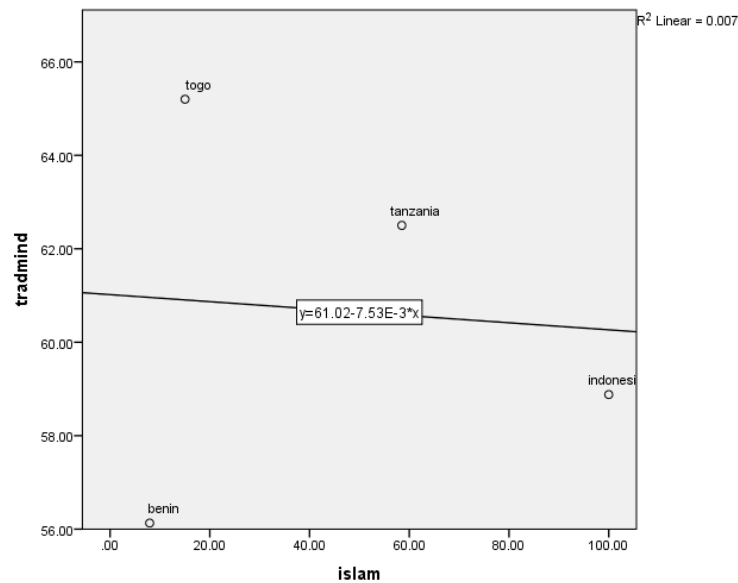


Figure 11. Islam and Traditional Mindset

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

The scatterplot presented in Figure 12 reveals that the pervasiveness of a traditional mindset, as measured by the index proposed above, and the percentage of respondents who know believers in traditional beliefs is strong and positive. There is a clear linear relationship between these two variables. What the scatterplot does not reveal, but the data themselves indicate quite clearly, is how similar the traditional mindset scores and the percentage of respondents who claim to know a believer in traditional religions. Except for Togo, where the proportion of respondents who know a traditional religion believer greatly outscores the country's Traditional Mindset score – 85.7 per cent of Togolese respondents know a believer in Traditional religion, while Togo scores 65.2 point in the Traditional Mindset Index – in Benin and Tanzania the percentage of respondents who know someone who believes in a Traditional Religion and the Traditional Mindset score are virtually identical. In Benin 57.1 per cent of the respondents know someone who believes in a traditional religion and Benin's traditional Mindset score is 56.13 – so there is less than a percentage point difference. In Tanzania, the discrepancy between the two scores is even smaller. In fact, while 63 per cent of the Tanzanian respondents claim to know someone who believes in a traditional religion, Tanzania's Traditional Mindset score is 62.5.

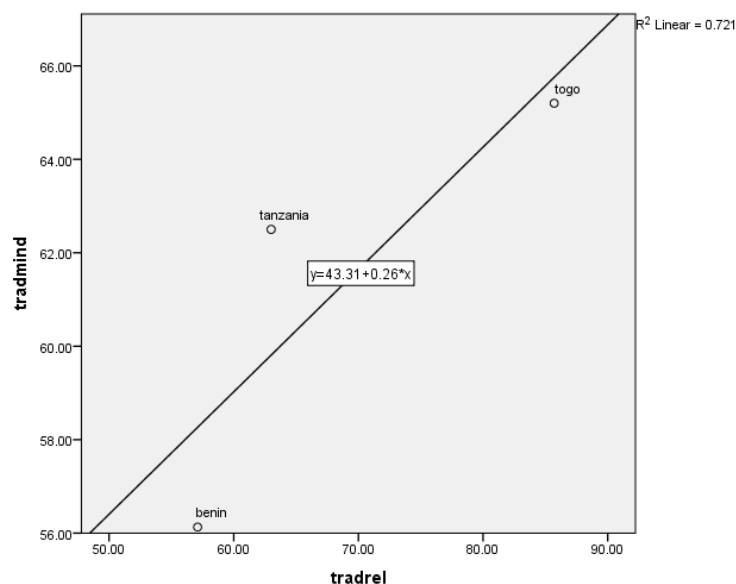


Figure 12. Traditional Mindset and Traditional Religions

Source: Processed by Authors, (2023)

The relationship between the Traditional Mindset score and the proportion of respondents familiar with individuals practising traditional religions provides strong validation for the index. This connection offers a clearer understanding of how religion and traditional mindsets interact. While the presence of a traditional mindset may be linked to religiosity, which is defined as how religious an individual or society is, the data currently available do not allow definitive conclusions. Certain elements of a traditional mindset are influenced by the presence of Islam in a society. However, the level of traditionalism, as measured by the index, does not appear to be directly related to the size of the Muslim population in each country.

Islamic law's flexibility in adapting to socio-economic conditions provides an important framework for analysing these variations. Guided by principles such as *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *maslahah* (public interest), Islamic law has mechanisms to address the evolving needs of societies, particularly in diverse religious and socio-economic contexts. In Indonesia, where Islam is the predominant religion, Islamic law has effectively reconciled traditional beliefs with modern socio-economic demands. For example, the inclusion of traditional healers within frameworks based on Islamic ethical principles demonstrates how religious law accommodates local customs. This contrasts with countries such as Benin and Togo, where smaller Muslim populations have allowed non-Islamic traditional beliefs, like animism and Voodoo, to dominate, shaping distinct socio-religious dynamics.

The acceptance and prevalence of traditional healers vary significantly based on the proportion of Muslim populations. In Indonesia, Islamic jurisprudence has created a framework where traditional medicine operates alongside modern healthcare, with both approaches addressing physical and spiritual well-being. This integration is less evident in countries with smaller Muslim populations, where traditional practices often exist without any Islamic ethical oversight.

The practice of exorcism, which is more common in countries with larger Muslim populations, also illustrates the influence of Islamic law on traditional rituals. In Islamic contexts, exorcisms are typically performed within frameworks that adhere to Sharia principles, ensuring alignment with broader ethical and religious standards. In contrast, in non-Muslim-majority settings, such practices often lack structured religious guidance, resulting in greater variability.

The interaction between religiosity and traditional mindsets highlights the role of Islamic law in shaping societal attitudes towards tradition. While earlier studies suggested that higher religiosity correlates with a greater likelihood of holding traditional beliefs, the findings here suggest that religious affiliation may play a more significant role than the intensity of religiosity. Through its principles, Islamic law often challenges pre-modern or unscientific practices that contradict its teachings, fostering a more rational and progressive mindset. This is reflected in the lower prevalence of beliefs such as the evil eye among Muslim-majority populations. By promoting education and rationality, Islamic law reduces reliance on superstition, aligning traditional beliefs with the values of modernity and progress.

In societies with smaller Muslim populations, the absence of an overarching legal and ethical framework can allow traditional beliefs to persist more strongly. This is particularly evident in Benin and Togo, where traditional mindsets remain prevalent and correlate with the dominance of non-Islamic traditional religions.

Finally, the relationship between a society's Traditional Mindset and the prominence of traditional religions reveals significant patterns. Societies where a larger proportion of the population identifies with traditional religions tend to exhibit stronger traditional mindsets. This reflects how religious affiliation, socio-economic conditions, and cultural factors work together to shape the complex relationship between tradition and modernity.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that socio-economic development does not uniformly diminish traditional beliefs, challenging assumptions that modernization invariably erodes pre-modern mindsets. While certain beliefs, such as the evil eye, show a decline in prevalence in more developed societies, practices like exorcism and reliance on traditional healers persist across socio-economic contexts, even in countries with higher literacy and life expectancy rates. Religious demography further complicates these patterns, as countries with larger Muslim populations often exhibit a distinct alignment of traditional practices within Islamic ethical and spiritual frameworks. Conversely, in non-Muslim-majority settings, traditional beliefs are more likely to coexist with or be reinforced by animistic and other non-Islamic traditions, demonstrating the multifaceted relationship between belief systems, socio-economic progress, and cultural identity.

To address the persistence and potential challenges posed by traditional beliefs, several actionable recommendations emerge from this study. First, educational programs should focus on enhancing scientific literacy and critical thinking, equipping individuals with tools to evaluate and navigate traditional practices within a rational framework. Second, religious and community leaders can play a pivotal role in reinterpreting traditional practices in ways that align with ethical and spiritual principles, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts where Islamic jurisprudence has the capacity to accommodate cultural variations while maintaining its core values. Third, policies should promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue to foster understanding and develop collaborative approaches to mitigating the harmful impacts of superstitions and other traditional

practices. These efforts should be tailored to respect cultural sensitivities while advancing socio-economic and intellectual development.

The implications of this research are significant for policymakers, religious scholars, and researchers. It highlights the necessity of considering the socio-religious and cultural contexts when designing interventions aimed at addressing traditional beliefs. Policymakers must recognize that traditional mindsets are deeply embedded in societal structures and cannot be universally addressed through socio-economic development alone. For researchers, this study underscores the importance of longitudinal and comparative analyses to examine the evolving dynamics of traditional beliefs over time and across diverse regions. Additionally, future investigations should delve into the role of governance, legal systems, and educational frameworks in shaping the persistence or transformation of traditional practices. By integrating these dimensions, both academic and practical strategies can more effectively balance respect for cultural heritage with the imperatives of modernization and global progress.

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