

CONSTRUCTING A MUSLIM PUBLIC SPHERE IN BURKINA FASO

La construction d'une sphère publique musulmane en Afrique de l'Ouest.

By Frédérick Madore.

Laval, Canada: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2016. Pp. viii + 208. \$29.95, paperback (ISBN: 978-2-7637-2811-7).

doi:10.1017/S0021853719000677

Key Words: Islam, Burkina Faso, religion, political.

What is the genealogy of the Muslim public sphere in Burkina Faso? This question is at the heart of *La construction d'une sphère publique musulmane en Afrique de l'Ouest*. In three chapters, an Introduction and a Conclusion, Frédérick Madore presents a sociohistorical account of a Muslim public sphere in a country where Muslims constitute 60 per cent of the population today, whereas at independence in 1960, they barely made up 20 per cent of the country. How can this development be explained? What factors and actors drove this process? How did it play out in the public arena? These are the preoccupations that structure this book.

The book chronicles a fifty-year long process and offers a periodization that relies on the coming of age of three specific cohorts of Muslims preachers, imams, and Islamic organizations. Madore considers the internal politics of these cohorts, as well as their theological orientations, interactions with other social forces, and relations to the state. Madore then illustrates the ways in which state policies, the *hajj* to Mecca, rivalries and conflicts within Islamic organizations, processes of political liberalization, religious entrepreneurship and

infrastructural development (mosques, schools, centers, etc.), and the transformation of the media landscape have all shaped the historical trajectory of Islam in Burkina Faso. Based on evidence primarily collected in Ouagadougou, the capital city, Madore argues that Burkina Faso has become home to a distinctive and discernable Muslim public sphere. The singularity of this process leads him to claim the existence of a 'Burkinabe Islam' (7).

The 1960–73 period corresponds to the structuring of the Muslim public sphere with the first cohort engineering the development that would result in an Islamic national body, that is, *La communauté musulmane de Haute Volta* (Chapter One). This non-political organization cooperated closely with state and local authorities. Sociologically, its internal politics were mostly shaped by gerontocratic relations and family ties. Contradictions between its two main factions ('*traditionalistes*' and '*reformistes*') led to a split and the creation of a Wahhabi organization, *Le mouvement sunnite de Haute Volta*.

Madore then considers the 1973–91 period, which he describes as one of maturity (Chapter Two). The trend to fragmentation that began in the earlier era continues as an increasing number of Muslim activists clashed and restructured their organizations. Some of these collective bodies reinforced their infrastructural presence with assistance from the Middle East. Two social categories marked this period: the *arabisants*, who were trained in Arabic and in Islamic learning institutions, often in the Middle East (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, etc.); and the *francisants*, or Muslim activists who had been trained in Western-oriented institutions, specifically Francophone ones. Struggles for legitimacy and leadership emerged between these groups. Other factors important to the era include the growing influence of the Wahhabi, intergenerational conflict and conciliation, and the political subordination of the Muslim sphere (70–80).

Madore describes the third period (1991–2015) as one in which Muslim organizations proliferated, as did corresponding, assertive claims to Muslim citizenship. This dynamic emerged in part because of the context of liberalization, which saw the creation of new religious mass media and more platforms for the expression of rivalries and competitions among religious organizations. Increased professionalization, in particular in the training of imams and preachers and in the management of mosques, further distinguished the Muslim public sphere in this period. Other features of the period include increased intergenerational collaboration, standardization of sermons, calls for the moralization of the society, and the reassertion of non-political stands by prominent Muslim leaders.

Madore argues that the sociological category of cohort, a key theoretical foundation of his book, helps him capture the intergenerational dimension that played an important role in shaping Islam in Burkina Faso. He shows that while conflict operates in that sphere, it is in no way the main driver of change. Youth have sought their emancipation from structures ruled and dominated by elders, while elders have also suffered loss of authority with the rise of the youth. Yet collaboration and intergenerational initiatives have remained strong.

Madore's book is thought provoking. For one thing, it revolves around organized Islam (Muslim and Islamic associations, NGOs, etc.) and elite figures (imams and preachers) to find evidence for its argument about the constitution and operation of a Muslim public sphere. This approach begs the question of whether a Muslim public sphere could exist outside of this framework. What is left out by this conceptualization of a Muslim sphere that relies on elite, groups, associations, and organized bodies? Perhaps the same question

can be asked of the literature that has emerged over two decades which engages the dynamics of Islam and the thought and action of Muslims in the wider region. What makes a public sphere? What processes does it entail? And what conceptual, analytical, and methodological precautions do scholars need to take in using this concept? These are critical questions that this book indirectly raises.

While the author elaborates the meaning of the concept of 'cohort', the categories of '*francisants*', '*arabisants*', '*reformistes*', and '*traditionalistes*' could have been engaged more theoretically, in particular in terms of their sociopolitical definitions and connections. That framework would have added to the conceptual and analytic value of the book, not only for those interested in Muslim dynamics in Burkina Faso, but also for cases throughout the larger region where those categories also repeatedly appear and circulate.

This book is a well-documented investigation and a case study with a sociological sensibility, yet one that is also driven by a clear historical agenda. It certainly helps to uncover the sometimes-tortuous trajectories of Islam in Africa. It adds to a body of literature, especially in the study of Islam in Africa, which has recognized the conceptual value of the notion of a public sphere. Focused, concise, and written in a clear style, Madore offers an informative read on Islam in Burkina Faso. He tells the story of public Islam in a country where, until a few decades ago, pro-West and pro-Christian policies marginalized Muslims, and Muslims were perceived as a community that needed to catch up. By calling attention to the societal and structural developments that shaped Islam and Muslim interactions, an approach that has applications within and beyond Burkina Faso, Madore presents a valuable and insightful perspective on understanding Islam in West Africa.

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