MADORE Frédérick. — *La construction d’une sphère publique musulmane en Afrique de l’Ouest.*
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Robert Launay
Muslims were a minority in Burkina Faso upon its independence. Its first president, Maurice Yaméogo, was Catholic, and indeed a Catholic elite dominated the entire state apparatus. Islam and Muslims were distinctly marginalized. Fifty years later, more than half the population is Muslim, mosques have proliferated in the capital and throughout the country, while Islamic organizations occupy a highly visible—if not dominant—place in the national landscape. Madore’s book chronicles this rise to visibility in the public sphere through a detailed and incisive analysis of three cohorts of Muslim leaders in Burkina Faso.

His account focuses primarily on the advent and proliferation of Muslim associations, beginning with the creation of the CMHV (Communauté musulmane de Haute Volta) in 1962. Throughout the book, he dwells on the nature of schisms dividing the Muslim community, both within and between associations, in many ways an index of broader religious cleavages within Burkinabe Muslim society. At the time the CMHV came into existence, the major divide, he suggests, was between “traditionalists” and “reformists.” (His use of quotation marks indicates a certain discomfort with such labels, not least because the actors themselves do not use such terms to characterize their religiosity.) Like many other analysts of contemporary trends in Islam in Africa, Madore does not really give the so-called “traditionalists” an entirely fair hearing. Their emphasis on
principles of seniority, hereditary religious leadership and reliance on distinctly non
modern modes of Qur’anic education, are alien not only to “reformists,” but also to most
European analysts. Be this as it may, Madore’s analysis, focused as it is on the formal
associational realm where “traditionalists” are often at a disadvantage, quickly moves on
to other bases of division within the Burkinabe Muslim community.

3 During the Yaméogo regime, the CMHV, virtually the only Muslim interlocutor to those in
power, carefully maintained an apolitical stance, manifested by public expressions of
support for the government in place. Throughout the proliferation of Muslim associations
of different stripes, this attitude, Madore notes, has remained consistent, as one regime
has replaced another, usually as the outcome of a coup. The first such coup, under Sangoule
Lamizana, opened up a space for Muslim visibility in the public arena, not only by
replacing the firmly established Catholic elite in power, but also by reversing its foreign
policy towards the Arab world. Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and also Libya donated oil
money to build mosques and to fund the education of students from Burkina Faso in their
countries, especially at Medina in Saudi Arabia, fostering the development of a Salafi
“Wahhabi” movement in Burkina Faso. The new division between Salafis and Sufis was
not a mere reiteration of differences between “traditionalists” and “reformists,” but
rather one that reflected cleavages within the “reformist” umbrella as well.

4 Madore insightfully demonstrates how the articulation of difference over the past fifty
years has shifted, not only by the emergence of new sites of conflict, but also the
accompanying resolution of others. For example, generational differences opposing those
who systematically favored senior leaders with those who clamored for the emergence of
younger ones, pronounced among both “traditionalists” and “reformists,” have been
systematically tempered over time. Simultaneously, cleavages between Arabic-speaking
and francophone modernizing leaders, those educated in the Arab world as opposed to
those educated in secular schools, grew more intense before, in turn, abating.

5 His analysis of the paradoxes of the increasing utilization of mass media by Muslim
associations is particularly astute. On one hand, the establishment of several radio
stations, and even a television station, affiliated to several Muslim associations has clearly
contributed to the visibility of Muslim preachers, at least of those who have access and
know how to use such media to their advantage. On the other hand, such broadcasts are
easy for the central government to monitor, leading to self-censorship that not only
precludes oppositional political stances, but also doctrinaire condemnation of other
Muslim tendencies (apart from the Ahmadiyya, consistently disparaged, if not berated, as
heretical by all other Muslim groups). The result is an increasing promulgation of a sort
of generic Muslim discourse, avoiding confrontation but also melding divergent religious
tendencies into a more homogenous voice.

6 Madore’s book is a highly perceptive account of the shifting terrain of Muslim leadership
in Burkina Faso over the past fifty years. But is leadership quite the same as the “public
sphere”? Habermas’s ‘original use of the term centered on the historical formation of the
evasive and sometimes illusory category of “public opinion,” one that focused on
consumption as much as production, on followers at least as much as leaders, but also on
the nature of those who were implicitly or explicitly excluded as well as those who were
included. Madore’s account has little to say about followers. We learn about the building
of mosques, but not attendance; about the production, but not the consumption, of mass
media. We are not given much insight into how, over these fifty years, Islam was
transformed from a minority to a majority religion in Burkina Faso, surely not an issue
that can be divorced from its emergence in the “public sphere.” It is somewhat unfair to reproach Madore for not raising, much less for not answering these questions, which are largely beyond the scope of his inquiry. This is really a detailed, authoritative, and perceptive account of the emergence of Islamic leadership in Burkina Faso. The story of the “public sphere” remains to be written.

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