CONSTRUCTING A MUSLIM PUBLIC SPHERE IN BURKINA FASO

La construction d’une sphère publique musulmane en Afrique de l’Ouest.
By Frédérick Madore.
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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 organ-
ization cooperated closely with state and local authorities. Sociologically, its internal pol-
itics 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 con-
ciliation, 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 reli-
gious 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 inter-
generational 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 struc-
tures 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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