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**GENEALOGIES OF A  
NON-POLITICAL ISLAM  
IN THE SAHEL:  
THE BURKINA CASE**

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# Genealogies of a non-political Islam in the Sahel: the Burkina Case

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## **Abstract**

Burkina Faso is an exception in the Sahel in that no politicisation and ideological radicalisation of Islam has taken shape in the public space. This paper – the first version of a chapter in an upcoming book – analyses both the causes and the implications of this fact. The historical analysis of the formative process of the Burkinabe nation reveals that Islamisation is a recent development in the country as compared to other parts of the Sahel. It came about as a result of the colonial transformation of societies in the area of future Burkina Faso, in the first half of the twentieth century and progressed in competition with Catholicism. While Islam later became the country's majority religion, the singular aspects of Burkina Faso's history – again, relative to its neighbours – have created a society marked by religious pluralism, and a very specific form of 'consensual secularism.' In this context, an Islamic public space has emerged where various doctrinal currents – modernist reformists, Wahhabis, Sufis – struggle to assert themselves, but which leads to an enduring combination of subordination to and partnership with Burkina's successive regimes, especially as influential Muslim merchants largely control the all-important trade economy of the country. This result does not imply that Muslims in Burkina are politically quiescent, but that they tend to mobilise politically not as Muslims, but as citizens of Burkina, as is testified by the country's stormy political history. The case therefore teaches us to avoid essentialising Muslims' existence in the political arena.

More than any other major religion, Islam inspires expectations of political or violent ideological radicalisation and of rejection of the secular norms of modernity. Such expectations have both heightened and become more widespread among Western publics as militant groups of Muslim ideologues use the arm of terror to challenge the West and ensure victory for their cause. Moreover, whether locked in a 'civilisational war' with the West or pursuing 'jihad' to establish 'Islamic states' in swathes of the Middle-East and Sub-Saharan Africa, Muslims appear to be governed by the essence of a religion which, we are often reminded, divides the world into 'Dar al-Islam' (the land of Islam) and 'Dar al-harb' (the land of war) and they will, of necessity, attempt imposing 'Shari'a law' wherever they have become the majority or a significant minority of the population.

These notions have gained wide popular credence quite recently, chiefly after the attacks of Al-Qaeda in the United States, in September 2001, which appeared to many to confirm a thesis developed some years ago by American political scientist Samuel Huntington – 'the clash of civilisations.' But well before that evolution, similar notions had been the substance of the historiography and of much of the political analysis devoted to Islam in West Africa. Many classics of the history of Islam in that region of the world are stories of 'penetration' and destabilisation of established systems and conquest or transformation, either by jihad or through mass conversion.<sup>1</sup> These teleological histories, which culminated in the victory and preponderance of Islam – even though none of today's West African states are Islamic states and in fact Islam-based polities did not outnumber customary states in the region in the nineteenth century – were presented in positive ways, almost as 'Whig histories' of Islam, meaning that this particular 'end of history' was a wholesome outcome for the countries in which it was purported to have occurred. We shall see, in this paper, that students of Islam in Burkina – particularly those based in the West! – expected and, to some extent, rooted for political radicalisation and some sort of Islamic revolution or takeover of the country in the 1980s period, when an 'Islamic revival' seemed to develop in Muslim majority countries of West Africa. When that did not happen, there appeared a need to explain the outcome by notions of suppression of the Islamic project by the state. Since, in the view of many Western analysts of African affairs in particular, the state in Africa is inherently illegitimate or dysfunctional, the suppression was often analysed as a setback for the progress of a form of cultural authenticity or the building of national legitimacy.

This reasoning has been problematised by contemporary Western anxieties about Islam, but even before the rise – comparatively recent – of these anxieties, it was in fact problematic. It was certainly well meaning as an empathetic understanding of the role of Islam in the region, but it was no less specious and biased. It was biased because it focused exclusively on Islam, as if no other form of cultural development occurred in the Muslim-majority countries of West Africa, alongside Islamisation, thereby leading to the assumption that Islam was the only form of 'authenticity' that people cared about in those countries;<sup>2</sup> and it was specious because the theory that Islam is by default radical in places where it is not (yet) the norm of society and government was a generalisation that failed to do justice to the complexity and historical heterogeneity of cases of Islamisation. This paper proposes a different approach in an analytical and genealogical study of Islam in Burkina

1 See for instance the chapters on Islam in *History of West Africa* (Ajayi and Crowder 1974), or M. Hiskett's (1984) aptly titled *The Development of Islam in West Africa*. While relatively more complex in his approach, Peter B. Clarke (1982) does not completely avoid this pitfall in his *West Africa and Islam. A Study of Religious Development from the 8th to the 20th Century*. Perhaps references to this term of 'development' are a clue to the teleological view inhering in such histories.

2 This is a form of bias that mainly derives from the blinkers of specialisation, and which, we must recognise, is very difficult to avoid.

Faso. Using the narrative empiricism of history, I reconstruct the rich cultural-religious diversity of the country, describing the particular place and role of Islam relative especially to Roman Catholicism – and I demonstrate that, while the religion developed vibrantly in the country, becoming its majority faith within just a few generations in the twentieth century, it has remained non-political under Burkina’s various political regimes since the colonial era, including for reasons that stunted logics of radicalisation. Yet, since the majority of Burkinabe are Muslims, and the country is known for a tempestuous political history, this points to the often neglected fact that Muslims can be political without Islam being political.

It must be understood at the outset that religion and politics are two different things – but that religion may become a force in politics, either by generating specific religion-based ideologies, or by conferring a political influence to figures who draw their legitimacy from the religious sphere. The political dimension of religion appears important on both count when discussing Islam, since that religion may foster what is referred to, in this paper, as a ‘Shari’a ideology,’ i.e., an ideology that claims that society should be governed or transformed by Shari’a; and it could also impart political influence to the heads or leaders of Islamic movements.

## The Burkina Question

Upper Volta – as Burkina Faso was then known – became a republic on a very auspicious day, according to Paul Zoungrana, the archbishop of Ouagadougou, the national capital. In a letter of flowery ecclesial prose sent in December 1961 to Maurice Yaméogo, the leader of the newly minted state, the monsignor enthused: ‘All of these regions which form the country of Upper Volta have been born, by the grace of God, under the patronage of Mary Immaculate, when our early missionaries dedicated to her this field of their apostolate. And it is again through a gentle consideration of Providence that the Republic of Upper Volta is born under the sign of Mary Immaculate, the eleventh of December, at the octave of her festival.’ (Bouron 2011, 125; my translation). Previously, on the 4th August, the eve of full independence, Yaméogo had received the blessings of Pope John XXIII, to whom he had recommended ‘a whole country that love[d] and revere[d]’ him, and on the 5th August, independence had been proclaimed to the tune of *La Volta*, an anthem composed by a Roman Catholic cleric: Abbot Robert Ouédraogo. Two years later, during a trip to Vatican City, Yaméogo called Upper Volta ‘the Church’s eldest daughter in the land of Africa’<sup>3</sup>. Catholic action and influence in/on the country was generally very impressive; one illustrating example is the fact that in 1965 Archbishop Zoungrana became the second Black African to be appointed a cardinal in the entire history of the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> In the resonance chamber of the nascent Voltaic nation, the Roman Catholic priesthood was offering to the state the religious guidance that could define the common culture of the people. Modern Upper Volta was clearly postulated, in the bays of the spireless Romanesque-Sudanic Cathédrale de l’Immaculée Conception – the see of the Archdiocese of Ouagadougou – as a Christian country, if not in actuality, at least in futurity.

The postulate was optimistic. In the demographic survey carried out in 1960-1961, Christians made up only 3.8% of the population, with the large majority of Voltaics (68,7% of the population)

3 ‘Une fille aînée de l’Eglise en terre d’Afrique.’ Quoted in *La Croix* of 27 April 1962 (Bouron 2011, 131).

4 *Jét*, 11 Feb. 1965, ‘Second Black African Elevated to Cardinal,’ p. 25.

identifying as animist. Importantly, 27.5 % of a population of about 4.8 million people in the early 1960s were Muslims. In the early 1900s, the Muslim population in the most populated section of future Upper Volta, the circle of Ouagadougou, was estimated at 7,000 souls, or about 2.3 % of a population of 300,000 (Kouanda 1995).<sup>5</sup> In just six decades, Muslims have therefore increased in numbers from at best 5 % of Voltaic population to more than a quarter, indicating that it was the fastest growing monotheism in the land. In the latest religious census of Burkina Faso,<sup>6</sup> the data confirm the trend. The two monotheisms have both made progress at the expense of animism, but Islam has become the clear majority religion in the country (61.6 %) with Christianity ranking second far behind (22.5 %), before animism and other identifications (15.9 %). Many Christians of our days belong to Protestant denominations, though Catholicism remains the majority Christian denomination.

But while the figures have changed, the pattern has remained much the same. The top levels of the Burkinabe state and the higher management of both public and private organisations in the formal sector of the economy are alike disproportionately staffed with Christians and in particular the Roman Catholic Church of the country remains highly influential in national politics. Out of the country's seven heads of state, only two were Muslims – and while one of them, Sangoulé Lamizana, converted to Islam rather late in life, the other, Saye Zerbo, actually converted to Christianity during the two years he spent in jail after being ousted by the Burkina Faso Revolution of 1983. If we count the two leaders of the political transition of 2014-15, and taking into account Zerbo's conversion, Burkina has had only one Muslim head of state against seven Christians – all of them Roman Catholic. Dramatic recent events testify to the continued political weight of the Catholic Church in Burkinabe affairs. The current archbishop of Ouagadougou, Cardinal Philippe Ouédraogo, was an instrumental force in the peaceful resolution of the series of political crises that gripped the Burkinabe political stage from October 2014 to November 2015. His role was comparable – albeit slightly inferior – to that of the Emperor of the Moose (see below), Baongo II, and it was clearly more important than that of the head of the Communauté Musulmane ('Muslim Community'), the Imam Sana. This continues a tradition that had been well illustrated, in the past, by the understated but sometimes quite decisive influence of Cardinal Zoungrana in public affairs. The fact that the Church, under the latter's leadership, openly scolded Yaméogo for his divorce and re-marriage in November 1965 was held by many to have been the beginning of the end for 'Monsieur Maurice,' as the first head of state of the country was known. Within three months, he was deposed by a coalition of civilian and military forces, in January 1966. This was not a direct effect of the Church's displeasure, but stressed that the Roman Catholic priesthood was in tune with the mood in the country and did not hesitate to challenge those at the levers of the state.

The traditional ruler of the Moose of Ouagadougou, the Mogho Naaba, wields a similar influence. With this title, which translates as 'King of the World', or 'of the country of the Moose' (Izard 1973, 193), the Ouagadougou customary potentate assumes *de facto* the role of the paramount leader of the Moose of the country and is referred to, in French, as 'l'Empereur des Mossi.' The Moose form a majority of the Burkinabe population,<sup>7</sup> and their role in the establishment of the

5 See also the statistics from the University of Sherbrooke's 'Perspective Monde' databases at <http://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/ComprendreContextePop?codePays=BFA&annee=2005>, last accessed 18 April 2016.

6 The Pew Research Center's 'the Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050,' April 2015, available at [www.pewforum.org/files/2015/03/PF\\_15.04.02\\_ProjectionsFullReport.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/03/PF_15.04.02_ProjectionsFullReport.pdf), last accessed 18 April 2016.

7 Official census does not count ethnic identification in Burkina, but counts language. The most recent census (2006) finds that fully 50 % of Burkinabe speak Moore, the language of the Moose, and the mapping of languages show

colony of Upper Volta was vital. The area had little economic interest as such from the point of view of colonialism but was perceived, at an early stage, as a solution to the persistent problem of the labour force, especially regarding investments in the more economically attractive colony of the Ivory Coast, in the south. As an inducement to enlist the Moose in the colonial enterprise, the French struck a *quid pro quo* with the Mogho Naaba: the powerful King of Ouagadougou allowed France to use Moaga<sup>8</sup> country as a labour reservoir, and in exchange, the French agreed to centre a new colony in Ouagadougou, thus bestowing on its king a dominant role in the country.<sup>9</sup> In that way, the Mogho Naaba became the representative and putative defender of Moose interests during French power while also being the go-between for French demands in the country. The ‘compact’ outwardly resembles the one which the French had established in Senegal with the Tijaniyya and Mouride Sufi orders, but characteristically, in Burkina, the local power with which they built an entente was not Islamic but traditional. That is a testimony to the vitality of Burkina’s old Sudanic culture as represented, in the instance, by the Moose. For, although Burkina Faso is no more a ‘Moaga country’ than it is a ‘Catholic country,’ the political importance of the Moose as an anchor of the Burkinabe state cannot be overstated. For instance, nearly all of Upper Volta and Burkina heads of state were Roman Catholic and Moose.

All of this having been said, this preface to the Burkina story is not to claim that the national concept would be, here, defined by a cultural hegemony that would combine Catholicism and the Moaga factor. Thus, for instance, if we look at the admittedly superficial evidence of presidential careers, both Maurice Yaméogo (*in off.* 1960–66) and Thomas Sankara (*in off.* 1983–87) were Catholic, they were both Moose and they both ruled the country – but on all other scores, it is hard to find as dramatically dissimilar leaders as these two, in their political project, leadership style and personality. Moreover, for different reasons, but following the same logic of state monopoly of power, they both ended up marginalising the Catholic Church and the Mogho Naaba, that is, the representative of the Moaga factor. And an analysis of the governance system of authoritarian ruler Blaise Compaoré, who had the longest run of power – 27 years – in Burkina’s history (*in off.* 1987–2014), shows that his religious supporters came essentially from Muslim and Protestant circles, even though he was himself a Roman Catholic, and, of course, a Moaga.<sup>10</sup>

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that most Moose-speakers live in the central provinces, which were the territories of the ancient Moose kingdoms. This means that the Moose must make up at the very least 45 % – but probably more than that, though less than 50 % – of the total population of Burkina Faso.

8 ‘Moaga’ is the singular form of ‘Moose.’

9 This was also done in a very material way: as a colonial agent, the Mogho Naaba received a salary of 20,000 francs from the French – when his colleague, the Yatenga Naaba, ruler of the kingdom which is considered to be at the origin of the Moose, was paid only 4,000 francs (Mc Farland, Miles, and Rupley 1998).

10 In an episode reminiscent of the divorce row of ‘Monsieur Maurice’ mentioned earlier, Burkina’s Catholic Church issued, on 15 July 2013, a lengthy pro-democracy ‘pastoral letter’ signed by all the country’s bishops and denouncing President Compaoré’s decision to create a senate while also unsparingly criticising the socio-economic results of his extended rule. Compaoré’s dogged intention to create a senate eventually triggered the sequence of events that led to his downfall the following year. See ‘Lettre pastorale des évêques du Burkina sur la mise en place du Sénat,’ <http://catholique.bf/index.php/documents-des-veques-du-burkina-niger/765-lettre-pastorale-des-veques-du-burkina-sur-la-mise-en-place-du-senat>, last accessed 8 March 2016. In contrast to the Catholic prelates, the Protestant pastors gave a half-hearted support to the senate project while the Muslim clerics unreservedly endorsed it. See ‘Mise en place du Sénat: les protestants hésitent, les musulmans approuvent,’ on [newsouaga.com](http://newsouaga.com), 16 September 2016, <http://news.aouaga.com/h/13557.html>, last accessed 8 March 2016. The late Msgr Jean-Marie Compaoré, who was the archbishop of Ouagadougou until 2009, may have harboured some sympathy for Compaoré. But not only did his opinions not reflect the position of the Church, they were badly misconstrued through the provocative headline blared out by the newspaper *Sidwaya* after a May 2004 interview: ‘Mgr Jean-Marie Compaoré: “je suis à 110 % pour l’alternance, mais qui, en dehors de Blaise Compaoré, peut diriger



So clearly, the Burkina history is not a simple one and raises several questions: how did this complex situation emerge? What is its meaning in relation to the fact that, in the Burkinabe context, no Shari'a ideology has taken form? What are the political and sociological forces that have led to the current outcome, especially as regards the behaviour of the state and the potential for radicalism that inheres in the country's economic stasis? And given all these parameters, why and how would we expect the country's religio-political balance to hold in the future? To respond to these questions, I will first examine the historical origins of the Burkinabe paradox of a predominantly Muslim country with a dominant influence from Catholicism and traditional leadership; and I will subsequently ponder the relations of the country's Islamic currents with the state, showing how, given the sociological bases of these currents, such relations eventually worked to preclude the emergence of a Shari'a ideology despite the existence, here as elsewhere, of political ideas that might have led to such an outcome.

## The past future of Burkina Faso

In 1888, when Captain Louis-Gustave Binger, the herald of French colonialism, travelled in the regions of the upper Volta rivers, people were coexisting there under complex political arrangements (Binger 1892). In the first areas he visited, and which are now the south-western districts of Burkina, the bulk of the population was made up of rustic peoples, whom Binger described as 'fetichist tribes' (*'peuplades fétichistes'*) or 'savages.' They lived in clan villages, had the kinds of peaceable occupations that went with farming, and were animists. Their descendants belong to the ethnic groups that we now know as the Bobo, Lobi, Senufo, Gurunsi, Bwa, Dagara, Bissa, Kurumba, and Samo, to mention only the larger communities. Trekking north-eastward, Binger left these verdant and bushy locales and reached the more austere region now known as Burkina's 'central plateau.' This was the domain of the Moose, another animist group, but of a much greater demographic size and political importance, given that it was organised in a number of powerful kingdoms. Unlike the other animist groups, the Moaga was both a farmer and a warrior, and he was the master of his country. Further east, the Gurmance had similarly organised a number of kingdoms of lesser power and importance, but strong enough to keep them free from unwanted outside interferences. To the north, lay the unwelcoming regions of the district now called 'the Sahel' according Burkina's administrative division. These barren expanses were sparsely populated and, in the 1810s, they had become the base of operation of a Fulani predator state that took the name 'Liptako Emirate' from a loose association with the Sokoto Caliphate.

The Muslim groups of the Liptako Emirate in the north and of the Kingdom of Kong – now in Côte d'Ivoire – in the south had gradually established their hegemony over the scattered animist populations in the west and south of future Burkina. This, however, did not entail any Islamisation process. The Fulani aristocracy that ruled in Liptako was primarily interested in procuring slaves and protecting its territory from rival groups such as the Tuareg and the Gurmance, and was

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ce pays?' (Msgr Jean-Marie Compaoré: 'I am 110% for power alternation but who can lead this country beside Blaise Compaoré?'). The actual words of the prelate in the text of the interview clearly meant to be more critical of the opposition than supportive of Blaise Compaoré and, at any rate, he unambiguously criticised the early moves toward changing the electoral law which later mobilised the Church against Compaoré's regime. See *Sidwaya's* article posted on Lefaso.net on 27 May 2004, <http://lefaso.net/spip.php?article2360>, last accessed 26 April 2016.

therefore engaged in constant warfare for the essentially temporal pursuit of power and wealth (Pillet-Schwartz 1999). The Diula of Kong, who imposed an apparently milder hegemony in the west through a network of unequal alliances that protected trade routes, were mainly interested in commerce, not in governance. Binger detected their ‘civilising’ influence for instance in the spread of male circumcision and in less drunkenness among the ‘fetishists’ who ‘recognised the authority of the Ouattara [the ruling dynasty of Kong].’ (Binger 1892, 356). If that were indeed the result of Diula influence, it did not dig much deeper than that, and the beliefs and traditions of the animists were left unaltered. Among the Moose, too, Muslim traders were active. Some of these were of Moaga ethnicity and the small religious-predatory polity of Wahabu, founded in the periphery of the Moose country by a Mande Muslim wanderer, had attracted some of the Moose Muslims who were displeased at the fact that animist beliefs ordered their native ruling systems (Binger 1892, 427).<sup>11</sup> Principally, however, Muslims in the Moaga country belonged to the Yarga (*plur.* Yarse) community of distant Mande origin, but settled among the Moose since the sixteenth century, having adopted their language and most of their traditional customs. There were also Hausa traders who journeyed from their homeland, far to the southeast. Faced with the local state organisation and the large population of a homogeneous ethnic group, it was the Muslim communities who were, here, the subaltern group.

The Moaga country – also called Mogho<sup>12</sup> – was at the margins of the trade economy organised by Muslim merchants across the Sudan, and their geographic position was also one of relative security. To understand the situation described so far, it is worth to go back in history. In 1498, the Songhay under Askia Muhammad attacked the ‘Moushi Koy’ (‘King of the Moose,’ in Songhay) after a declaration of jihad. However, as was noted by Abderrahman as-Sadi, the author of the *Tariq es-Sudan*, Askia Muhammad ravaged the Mogho but had to leave it to ‘Iblis,’ and only ‘the men and women captured at that time became blessed by God’ by being turned into Muslims (Hunwick 2003, 107).<sup>13</sup> Perhaps due to this and possibly other negative experiences with the Islamic government of Songhay, the Moose kings accepted the establishment of Muslim merchants in the sixteenth century only with severe restrictions on the practice of the religion, in particular forbidding the public recital of Muslim prayers (Tauxier 1912, 585). Moreover, not only were the Muslims not allowed to settle in Moose villages, they were also gradually made to adopt the language and many of the customs of the Moose. The fact that the Moose kingdoms were only marginally integrated into the political economy of the larger Sudan is likely to have made such policies easier to adopt. At any rate, it would also explain why the post-Songhay crisis or anarchy, which affected much of the West African Sudan in the seventeenth century, leading to the emergence of predatory states, had little impact on the Mogho.

In this region, state centralisation came about through the consolidation of kingly power against the major feudatories – the *nakomse* – in the two great Moose kingdoms, Oubritenga (Ouagadougou being the capital of this one) and Yatenga (Levtzion 2008, 185–186). While in other parts of

11 Although a Muslim, the founder of Wahabu had much in common with the animist warriors who roamed the post-Songhay Sudan, as did not escape the observation of Binger (Rouch 1990, 19; Kiéthéga 1983, 155).

12 See B. Beucher on this name: ‘Among the Moose, the Mogho refers to the central space, refined, mastered by Man, around which gravitate populations deemed to be less “civilised”: the Gurunsi, the Samo or the Bisa, for instance, who did not build any political structure comparable to theirs’ (Beucher 2012, 94).

13 Askia Muhammad had followed the formal procedure of declaration of Jihad by sending an envoy to the Moaga king, Nasiri [Naaba Nabsire] and urging him to embrace Islam. Nabsire replied that he needed to consult the ancestors first and subsequently rejected the Askia’s appeal to convert. The envoy then claimed to have talked with one ancestor of the Moose, who told him that he was Iblis (the Islamic deceiving demon) who was maliciously ‘leading [the Moose] astray so that they may die as unbelievers.’

the Sudan, the process increased state power at the expense of state legitimacy, as was evidenced by the rampant violence and predatory nature of the new elites, in the Mogho, both kingly power and legitimacy were in fact increased, and resulted in the emergence of law and order. Visiting the Mogho in 1890-91, shortly after Binger (1888), Lieutenant-Colonel Parfait-Louis Monteil, a man who had a military eye for such things, was struck by the general ambiance of peace and orderliness as compared with the other parts of the Sudan which he had traversed: 'One is compelled to recognise that this regime [...] has its advantages, for the prosperity of the Mossi is perfect and doubtless goes back many years in the past. The traveller is amazed by the peace and tranquillity which prevail on the outskirts of villages: everywhere, the land is being cultivated, people come and go on the tracks, often without weapons. Uniquely, the Mossi is the only Sudanic country where villages are not fortified. To the contrary, large settlements do not exist: when a village is mentioned, it is in fact a district, a district in which groups of huts are scattered and separated by distances of fifty or a hundred metres' (Monteil 1894, 123). In those same years, Charles Henry Robinson was crossing the territories of the Sokoto Caliphate, travelling to Kano and reporting alarming news of violence and insecurity in a landscape dotted with *birane* (sing. *birni*), the Hausa walled towns (Robinson 1896).

The features of the Moaga political system that led the French to court the assistance of the Moose kings to establish colonial rule in the country emerged in the era of monarchical consolidation. That is when the kings were able to build their 'feudal-like control of [...] provinces, districts and villages' through a 'complex hierarchical administrative apparatus' that extended their power 'into the smallest village' and 'funnel[led] taxes and tributes back to them' – a system so efficient in controlling and exploiting the governed that the French will keep it after conquest, despite extensive tinkering (Skinner 1958, 1103). But in the unwritten constitution of the Moaga customary monarchy, the position of the kings, and therefore the efficiency of the system, depended absolutely on their reverence for Moose traditions and on discharging their duties as the intermediaries with the ancestors, the preternatural beings, in Moaga religion, who weighed and measured men and peoples, and rewarded and punished them accordingly. In such a context, it was, in theory, impossible for kings and their heirs to convert to Islam. This changed slowly as time passed, especially in higher society. Thus, royal cadets, who were not expected to rule, could convert to Islam, a fact that gradually gave to the religion some standing – though no effective power – in the state. In the 1750s<sup>14</sup> Naaba Kom, whose mother was a Yarga Muslim woman, allowed the Yarse to live in Moose villages and his successor, Naaba Sagha I, removed some district chiefs and replaced them with his sons, royal cadets converted to Islam.

Finally, in 1783, the court elected a Muslim as king, Naaba Dulugu. Although he was careful to separate his religion from his obligations as a Mogho Naaba, Dulugu appointed a Yarga Muslim scholar as imam, built the first mosque of Ouagadougou – fully five centuries after places like Gao and Kano – and sponsored the establishment of Koranic schools. But he did not hesitate to exile his son when the latter showed tactless dispositions to interfere with the political structure in the name of Islam. In the nineteenth century, there will be more Muslim Mogho Naaba, and the practice developed, in cases when the Mogho Naaba was a devout Muslim, to transfer the discharge of some of his traditional religious functions to court officials. The possibility of this *modus vivendi* removed an important obstacle in the Islamisation of Moaga society, without, however, guaran-

14 Skinner, who gives this information, supposes that Naaba Kom ruled in the 1780s (Skinner 1958, 1105), but more believably, given the chronologies of recent Mogho Naabas, the Larle Naaba Abgha (Yamba Tiendrebeogo) places his reign in 1744-62 (Tiendrebeogo and Pageard 1963, 8).

teeing any progress or success. Thus, when approaching Ouagadougou in June 1888, Binger met Naaba Boukary Koutou, a royal prince living in exile away from the capital because his father, the Mogho Naaba Sanem, wished to prevent a succession quarrel after his death. Sanem was a devout Muslim who sent most of his children to a Koranic school and built a mosque at the gate of his palace, but the faith of his banished son was perfunctory at best. In a characteristic episode, Boukary asked Binger why he was not joining other faithful in the great prayer ceremony for the end of the Muslim fasting month, to which the Frenchman replied that the festival did not match those of the Christians. Boukary, observed Binger, 'looked delighted that the Whites were not Muslim' (Binger 1892, 456).

The following year, Sanem died and Boukary forcibly seized power, taking up the throne name Wobgho ('The Elephant'). Despite his truly elephantine energy and wilfulness in resisting the colonisers, the Mogho Naaba Wobgho's reign has been cut short by the French only eight years later. The French occupation of the Mogho and adjacent territories will create the key conditions for both the rapid advance and yet the political weakness of Islam in Burkina. However, these conditions, more than any other factor, were themselves determined by the fact that, unlike in other parts of the Sudan, Islam had found it impossible to penetrate societies in future Burkina until the arrival of the French.

## The birth of Burkina's religious balance

Colonialism introduced in future Burkina not so much the 'politics of Islam' as the 'politics of Islam and Christianity.' Unlike in the other countries of the Sudan/Sahel – with the exception of Nigeria/Northern Nigeria – Christianity, or more specifically, Roman Catholicism, is a major factor in Burkina's religious politics. Traditional religions, including the one practiced by the powerful Moose, were excluded from religious politics at an early stage, since they were no proselytising religious forms and would not compete with Islam and Christianity in acquiring followers. But in the case of Burkina at least, there is much that we will fail to understand if we dismiss traditional religions. In effect, these religious forms remain socially and culturally influential for two reasons. First, the fact that none of the two monotheisms has managed to establish its supremacy favours a climate of religious pluralism in which most Burkinabe are able to maintain a dual allegiance to one monotheism and to their own traditional religion, this being especially the case for the smaller ethnic groups of the southern and western parts of the country (the descendants of Binger's *peuplades fétichistes*); and second, despite their extensive Islamisation and Catholicisation, the Moose remain attached to their ancient political structures, which continue to draw their meaning from traditional religion. In the particular case of the Moose, this gives their old religious culture a somewhat oblique impact on the country's political stage, including through the enduring prominence of the Mogho Naaba and its court officials. As we shall see, from the perspective of the republican norm of state building that Burkina inherited from French colonialism, the political status of the Mogho Naaba is similar to that of the leaders of the Catholic and Islamic communities, as it clearly draws its stature from a position that is lateral rather than integral to the order of the civil state. The major players, then, in Burkina's 'politics of Islam and Christianity,' are various Islamic currents, Roman Catholicism, the Mogho Naaba and the state.

### Politics of Islamisation: weakness in numbers

By fending off jihad, both from Songhay and later from the Liptako Fulani, the Moose ensured that Islam would be represented in future Burkina only through its non domineering representatives, merchants. This was an Islam of persuasion rather than violence, resting on the sociable virtues of the three great groups of Sudanic Muslim merchants, as defined, for instance, by Honoré Poyouor Somé: ‘the *bonhomie* of the Hausa made business contacts and relations easier; the *politeness* of the Yarga surrounded customers with all manners of cares; and *eloquence* from the Diula finished the work off’ (Somé 2010, 72). While Somé is referring here only to commercial acumen rather than to a zeal for Islamisation, the Muslim merchants did familiarise the peoples of future Burkina with Islam, even if this led to few conversions – and in particular, to no collective conversion of any given population.<sup>15</sup>

Colonialism changed the position of Islam relative to traditional culture and also transformed the needs of societies in future Burkina in ways that stimulated Islamisation. In the era of rapid change introduced by the colonial trade economy and incipient urbanisation of hitherto nearly exclusively ‘rural’ societies, a transition from traditional religion to Islam appeared to many as an ideal form of adjustment to modernity. The religion had been present in accommodative ways for a long time, and its basic requirements harmonised with key aspects of the flagging traditional organisation of society – including polygyny and, more broadly, interpersonal relations in the all-important family realm (Skinner 1958). Moreover, in the process of establishing their administration, the colonisers disrupted the ancient political organisation, fostering freedom from the traditional religious authorities on a large scale. As a result, people felt they had the choice to follow one of the monotheistic religions, and in most cases, Islam was the favoured option (Kouanda 1995, 945–946). However, there were complications.

First and foremost, there was the attitude of the colonial state, which, in relation to Islam, was defined not by the particular situations in Upper Volta, but by the larger context of French West Africa.<sup>16</sup> French views of Islam in the region were shaped on the one hand by their notions about Africa and Islam, and, on the other hand, by the need to stabilise and expand their dominance. The colonisers had a non-historical perspective on African societies, believing them to be actually defined by the categories that they themselves had imagined to study them: the ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ African, and the Muslim, ‘civilised,’ but with his civilisation stunted by ‘fanaticism.’ All French colonial science, from Faidherbe takeover of Senegambia in the 1850s to decolonisation, was shaped by this procrustean epistemological frame, which French scholars and administrators consistently applied, with more or less sophistication, to the study of Sudanic societies and cultures. With respect to colonial dominance, the French were not only anxious to defuse any real or imagined challenge from Islam to their rule, but also to secure an active cooperation of influential Muslim leaders to the consolidation of colonialism. In this respect, lack of cooperation could be construed as a form of hostility. Moreover, the peculiar conceptions that the French nurtured about Africa and Islam were inscribed in the general evolutionary theory of history which was a hallmark of nineteenth century European intellectual culture. In that framework, Islam was often viewed as a step on the way to civilisation, something markedly better than the indigenous

15 There were also independent Islamic settlements in the Volta regions, founded by Fulani or Mande (Marka) clerical militants, but these remained isolated pockets of Islamic culture without much Islamising influence around them.

16 For good studies of French policies with regard to Islam in West Africa, see D. C. O’Brien (1967) and C. Harrison (1988).

African way,<sup>17</sup> but inferior to modern Europe. In that sense, colonial policy enlisted religion in France's civilising mission, as a way to integrate community-bound Black fetishists into 'great political constructions' (Audouin and Deniel 1978, 36) such as the nations of the modern centuries. In contrast to that perspective more negative attitudes existed as well: Islam was not considered as superior to 'fetishism' and, moreover, but rather as having an ingrained hostility towards the French, sabotaging their plans by dint of sheer 'fanaticism' and attachment to 'oppressive' mores. As a result, it must be extirpated or contained.<sup>18</sup>

Later, in the 1920s, the French grew more confident, although not much wiser, in their views about Africa and Islam. During the First World War, Muslims in West Africa had supported the French war effort, and France had developed vital stakes in a certain form of Islamic organisation – namely the Sufi orders, especially the Tijaniyya – for the growth of the colonial trade economy in the Sudan. Moreover, the volume of scholarly research on Islam in West Africa sponsored by the government had considerably increased official knowledge of the religion and its positions in the region, even though the epistemology behind such increased knowledge remained dubious. The actions of the French in Upper Volta were determined by these various elements. Unlike in other Sudanic colonies, where Islam was seen as a factor that could not be overlooked, the colonial state tended to consider that here, in Upper Volta, it was something that could be successfully 'contained.' The baseline thinking was that, since securing the active cooperation ('loyalty') of Muslims was often fraught with difficulties visible and invisible, whenever such cooperation could be dispensed with, it was better to seek the support of alternative groups – in the case of Upper Volta, the Moose kings and, to some extent, the Catholic Church. The attitude of the colonial state was the same across the French-ruled Sudan, since it was in fact the same state everywhere, at least until 1945, when the colonies were granted a form of self-rule. Therefore, we find traces of this particular outlook in Mali, Niger and Senegal as well – and also in the behaviour of the post-colonial state through the French-speaking Sahel. However, there are variations, and it was doubtless in Upper Volta that Muslims were most prevented from building constructive relations with the state during the colonial period.

Secondly, as elsewhere in the Sudan, different Islamic currents jockeyed for position in the colony, and the colonial state interfered. Containment of Islam in Upper Volta had initially consisted of harassing or even arresting individual clerics with an anti-colonial message, a policy moderated by the notion that the colony was a land of '*Islam noir*' (Black [African] Islam), superstitious, but not fanatical. But the colonial authorities took a dim view of the fact that the most rapidly growing branch of Tijaniyya in Upper Volta, particularly among the Fulani of Liptako and the Moose of Yatenga, was the one that followed the teachings of Shaykh Hamauallah, an unorthodox cleric from the French Sudan whom the colonial state had persecuted essentially because he was found to be insufficiently cooperative with colonialism. Hamawiyya was not doctrinally very different from other Tijaniyya teachings, but it provided a religio-political idiom that organised the aspirations of the poor, women and servile classes in a large swathe of the western Sudan, especially in the French Sudan, northern Upper Volta and western Niger. Its progressive ideology was bound to be

17 A good example of this is found in Alain Quellien (1910) esp. chap. V of Part I. From his glowing general assessment of the influence of Islam in West Africa, Quellien drew the logical policy recommendations of adopting conciliatory attitudes towards Muslim leaders and decried 'Islamophobia' – one of the earliest uses of the concept (Part II, chap. I).

18 This was in particular the outlook of Governor William Merlaud-Ponty (*in off.* 1908-1915), who imagined a panoply of distasteful measures to harass 'fanatical' Muslim clerics considered as the 'enemies' of colonising France (Moreau 1964, 123–125).

successful in those parts of the Sudan where Islam was making its first inroads amongst the popular classes and could not be appropriated as a conservative philosophy by the dominant classes. Aside from being shocked by Hamawis attitudes that smacked of intolerance, the French saw in the movement a challenge to the Islamic-colonial establishment whose authority they had carefully buttressed. So they went into repression mode in the early 1940s. To combat Hamawiyya in Upper Volta, they favoured the development of the more conservative brand of Tijaniyya – the ‘twelve-beaded Tijaniyya’ – which prevailed in Senegal, repeatedly flying in their clerical ally, Thierno Seyou Nourou Tall, leader of the Senegal-based Umarian Tijaniyya, to attend events in the colony, sometimes as mundane as the inauguration of Dedougou’s first Friday mosque in 1950 (Cissé 2003, 947).<sup>19</sup> After the political liberalisation of 1945, Hamawis would tend to support the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), a newly created federal party which represented Black nationalist aspirations in French West Africa.

By that time, however, a third player had emerged on Upper Volta’s Islamic scene: the Wahhabiyya (generally spelt ‘Wahhabia’ in Burkina, following local pronunciation). This Salafi movement, very critical of Sufi *bid’a* (‘innovations’) – including the Hamawis worshipping at the tombs of the deceased leaders of their movement – and insistent on the prescriptive framework of Islam, emerged in the merchant class of the western regions of the colony. Urbanisation, especially of Bobo Dioulasso, and the integration of western Upper Volta, Côte d’Ivoire and the French Sudan in the colonial trade economy, were the compost from which it fed and grew. The new current was partly sustained by the old clerical Islam of the Diula merchants, but also received doctrinal influx from pilgrimages to Mecca, made easier than in historical times, but still affordable mainly to the merchant class. Its Wahhabi colouration came from these holy voyages (Kobo 2009; Saint-Lary 2012). By the early 1950s, the offspring of the Wahhabi merchants, and some other young Muslims, had received formal education in the secular or Catholic mission schools, where they had come into contact with the modernist criticism of Islam as a superstitious religion that fostered social and economic stagnation. Some later received further formal education at the Al-Azhar University of Cairo, where they were able to develop high calibre Islamic scholarship while also encountering exciting new visions of Islamic orthodoxy.

This combination of a legalistic conception of Islam – based on literal adherence to Shari’a as a source of prescriptions for personal conduct –, modernist formal education and contacts with North African/Middle Eastern conceptions of Islam, is the matrix of the political ideas which, under certain conditions, may lead to the emergence of Shari’a ideology. In the 1950s French West Africa, these ideas did have in fact an incipient ideological incarnation within two action groups: the Union Culturelle Musulmane (UCM, founded in Senegal) and the Subbanu al-Muslim, initially strongest in the French Sudan. Their main plank was to develop formal Arab-Islamic education across French West Africa, in response to the worrying fact that the modernist elites of the French-speaking Sudan were being trained chiefly in secular and mission schools. The UCM opened a chapter in Bobo Dioulasso in 1958, but attempts at fostering an ideological movement floundered against the heterogeneous nature of Voltaic Islam, divided not only along doctrinal lines, but also into ethnic-cultural chapels. Moreover, given the importance of Muslim activists from outside the colony in the development of Voltaic Islam, a tension appeared between ‘*Islam autochtone*’ (home-grown Islam) and the ‘*allogènes*’ (aliens).

19 Date unreported, but probably in 1950. See, on the date, S. Coulibaly, ‘Dédougou s’enrichit d’une nouvelle mosquée de vendredi,’ in *Le Pays* of 10 July 2011. Dedougou is a town in north-western Burkina.

As a matter of fact, the first general unified organisation of Muslims in Upper Volta developed, not without difficulties, with the efforts of a Guinea-born cleric, Iva Haïdara. Haïdara, the son of a renowned cleric of Kankan in French Guinea, had arrived in Ouagadougou with the stated goal to convert the Mogho Naaba to Islam. This caused great alarm to Governor Albert Mouragues, who agitated against the project with both the Mogho Naaba and the Guinean *marabout*. Changing tack, Haïdara then decided that Ouagadougou needed a central mosque, a project which required Muslim unity. Rifts immediately appeared between Moose, Diula and Hausa Muslims concerning the position of Imam, with the two latter groups rejecting outright the notion of a Moaga Imam, because they were convinced that Moose Muslims were in fact subjected to Moose traditional authorities.<sup>20</sup> In their rebuff, the Diula and the Hausa benefited from the unexpected assistance of Mouragues, who feared the emergence of a leading Moaga Islamic personality, while the Moose accused the governor of meddling with religious affairs. Eventually a non-Moaga Imam was consensually chosen, and the first test of a plural organisation of Islam in Upper Volta was successfully concluded. On another score, the leadership of the Bobo Dioulasso chapter of UCM was staffed exclusively with non-Voltaics, to the displeasure of many Muslims in the town. UCM has been expelled by the independent Upper Volta state a few later, but in the meantime its action inspired, in Ouagadougou, the establishment of a more 'autochthonous' organisation, the Communauté Musulmane de Ouagadougou (CMO). Characteristically, even that autochthonous organisation largely owed its existence to another *allogène*, a Mauritanian UCM member and trader, Moulaye Hassane. This embryo of the current Communauté Musulmane du Burkina Faso (CMBF), the new religious outfit claimed to be non-political, meaning implicitly that if it wished to promote Islamic culture like UCM, it was not pursuing any ideological project.<sup>21</sup> All this was necessary to unify the various tendencies and chapels making up the Islamic scene in Ouagadougou and in Upper Volta more generally. Under its first national incarnation as the Communauté Musulmane de Haute-Volta (CMHV), the organisation briefly offered a vehicle for the cultivation of the political ideas that might have developed into a Shari'a ideology, as we will see later. In the 1950s, CMO played a secondary role in that regard. The intense party politics of the era provided more straightforward opportunities for regrouping people along the cleavages brought onto the Voltaic political stage by the rival monotheisms, at least in the urban areas.<sup>22</sup> This development, which could have put Burkina on the pathway leading to the same sorts of interreligious hostility and violence that later became characteristic of Nigeria, was made possible and apparently unavoidable by the colonial context of Catholic-Muslim competition. But in the end, that dangerous futurity did not materialise, despite the fact that – as we shall see in the following subsection – Catholicism had acquired a disproportionate influence with the state. I will return to what happened instead after an exploration of the politics of Catholicisation.

20 Dim Delobsom reports that the Imam of the Mogho Naaba was a court dignitary who, like other officials, had to take an oath of loyalty to the king during a ceremony which he sees as 'barbarous,' i. e., related to Moaga religion (Delobsom was a Catholic convert) (Delobsom 1932, 206). Skinner describes a ceremony where the royal Imam would swear by God and *Nabiyanna* (the Prophet Muhammad) to be loyal to the king, but without performing any un-Islamic rite (Skinner 1964, 134–135).

21 At that point, the UCM chapter of Ouagadougou was headed by a Wahhabite, a wealthy merchant by the name Alhaj Ousmane Sibri, who happened to be the father-in-law of the Mogho Naaba.

22 For developments in the late colonial era, see J. Audouin and R. Deniel (1978, 64–69).



### The politics of Catholicisation: the making of a potent minority

Catholicism followed closely on the heels of colonial takeover (1896) since the first Catholic mission, of the White Fathers, opened doors in 1900, in Koupela, a town 105 km east of Ouagadougou. It was not, however, part of colonialism, at least – initially – not more than Islam. In the period 1880-1905, Third Republic France was consolidating its long disputed national legitimacy by engineering a protracted assault on the Catholic Church at the hand of a succession of radical republican governments. In the case of religious education and the activities of Catholic orders and congregations, the French Republic suspended the liberal juridical regulation of the freedom of religion. Especially from 1901, when a law curtailed freedom of association for Catholic organisations, to 1905, when legislation finalised France's progress toward political secularism, or *laïcité*. Although the *laïcité* law adopted in December 1905 was far more moderate than the radical anticlerical faction had wished, many Catholic orders and congregations had left France by then, and only a handful were allowed to carry on their activities, especially in the colonies. Such was the case of the White Fathers congregation, a missionary organisation dedicated to Africa and responsible for processes of Catholicisation in places as diverse as Congo, Uganda or Ghana.

Anticlericalism existed also in the colonial administration. Especially before the First World War, which ended the more vigorous thrusts of the ideology, there was a known tendency to promote anticlerical officials – often freemasons too – in places of responsibility in the navy and the colonies. As a result, there was no automatic sympathy or coordination between the colonial administration and agents of Catholicisation. While the colonial state supported the Catholic missionaries where it found them to be useful, it opposed them where their aims contradicted those of the state. The missionaries were anxious to preserve their autonomy vis-à-vis the colonial state, and to demonstrate to potential converts that they were no stooges of colonialism. In French West Africa, where Islam was so far the dominant religion, the colonial state often appeared to promote Islam to the exasperation of the Catholic missionaries. In 1933, the missionaries were shocked and dismayed by the visit of Seydou Nourou Tall, grandly organised in Ouagadougou by the authorities. The Catholic outrage – neither the first, nor the last – originated in the fact that, in their perspective, Upper Volta was a special case in the Sudan. When the first missionaries arrived in the country, Islam was a marginal religion, especially among the most powerful population in the area, the Moose (the historical reasons for that have been elaborated in detail in the previous chapters). Audouin and Deniel quote an essay in a Catholic paper which enthused about the fact that when a Moaga was asked whether he was a Muslim, he would respond, 'No, I am a Moaga,' 'as if,' continued the writer, 'the two things were incompatible' (Audouin and Deniel 1987, 77).<sup>23</sup> Msgr. Hacquard, who had persuaded himself that 'the Moose do not have [...] the Muslim turn of mind' (*le tempérament musulman*), wanted their country to become 'the Abyssinia of our Sudanese empire' (Audouin and Deniel 1987, 83). This formula summarises the attitude of the Catholic missionaries in Upper Volta right until the 1950s. The country was seen as a final rampart against Islamisation in the Sudan, and obsidional metaphors proliferated in that regard. Other parts of the region were lost to Islam, but thanks to the Moose, the Volta regions could yet be catholicised. In this view, a three-pronged strategy was devised: first, it appeared vital to enlist the assistance of the colonial state in order to forcefully keep Islamic proselytising – i. e., the competition – out of the

23 Given the tight and thick social-political integration of the traditional Moose kingdoms, and the imbrication of all segments of society through exchange systems underpinned by ritual beliefs, such was very much the case at that point in time.

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land; second, the animists and ‘nominal Muslims,’ that is, the bulk of the population, were all to be considered fair game for Catholicisation; and third, alongside conversion campaigns, the Church would also build its legitimacy as a beneficial religious institution through providing education and social care to the population. By the 1950s, the evidence shows that while the missionaries had been only partially successful in the two first goals – which were the most important in their eye – they had in fact secured their position in the country through their achievements in the third, and more marginal, undertaking.

The colonial state did not see in Catholicism a threat or a challenge to its authority. But some scepticism persisted as Catholicism, as well as other Christian doctrines, was perceived as something that could get in the way of the colonial state and therefore should, at times, be reined in. In September 1919, France had signed the ‘protocol of Saint-Germain,’ a revision of the founding texts of colonialism (the General Act of Berlin of 26 February 1885 and the Declaration of Brussels of 2 July 1890) to the effect that the colonial powers, in the name of freedom of conscience and religion, had to ensure that ‘religious, scientific or religious charitable organisations’ were free to lead ‘the natives [of the African colonies] in the path of progress and civilisation’ irrespective of their national origin (Foster 2013, 227). This commitment meant that the French colonial empire was open to Christianisation by all, but colonial administrators saw in it a source of potential disturbance and an imposition of the metropolitan government. Interim Governor General Brunet wrote that it might be the death warrant of an ‘enlightened, tolerant, most French policy,’ which respected ‘local religions and traditions’ instead of giving ‘license to propagandists of all sects to infringe on the religious convictions of our subjects’ (Benoist 1987, 262–263). The protocol of Saint-Germain presented two problems from the point of view of the colonial state: first, the irruption of ‘European religious propaganda’ (Brunet) might be a source of disturbance and might even unwittingly increase the appeal of Islam (Audouin and Deniel 1987, 116); second, the arrival especially of American missionaries ‘and their dollars’ might undermine the French cachet of the civilising mission and eventually challenge French dominance and prestige. If, in the first instance, Catholicisation was viewed as part of the problem, in the second instance it appeared as part of the solution, since the Catholic missionaries were French and supplemented Christian zeal with a patriotic outlook.

To mitigate or channel the effects of the protocol of Saint-Germain, the colonial state adopted, in February 1922, a decree that restricted its conditions of application in the realm of education, and established a framework of surveillance of the activities of Christian missionaries, Catholic and Protestant alike. Throughout the remainder of colonial rule, the authorities will use that piece of legislation to discipline the missionaries, also creating conditions that were objectively and intentionally favourable to the Catholics. Indeed, the White Fathers in Upper Volta and the French Sudan quickly understood that they had some leverage, owing to the fact that their educational and social work redounded to France and could be credited to colonialism. And the stringency of the education provisions of the decree only goaded them to make choices that, eventually, strengthened the quality of their schools (Benoist 1987, 283–284). On the other hand, however, the mood within the colonial state could never be trusted entirely, since, with regard to Christian action in the colonies, it depended to a large extent on the vagaries of politics in metropolitan France. Although the *laïcité* laws were not promulgated in French West Africa, anticlerical and freemason politicians kept a vigilant eye out on developments in the colonies with the intention to obstruct any legally dubious advantage given to the Church. As will be shown below, the Catholic leaders had a much better access to the authorities in Upper Volta than their Muslim counterparts, but they were unable to establish any real collaboration with the colonial state on their primary project, the conversion of

the people to Christianity. In particular, despite their best efforts – they were not above informing on ‘fanaticised’ Muslim chiefs and clerics (Kouanda 1997, 47) – colonial authorities did not stamp Muslim proselytising out and the Catholic missionaries had to fend for themselves in a highly competitive religious market.

From the outset, in the struggle for Catholicisation, the White Fathers decided to pass the northern regions of the colony over and to concentrate on the centre and the west, believing that it would be easier to persuade people untouched by, or with what they hoped were superficial contacts with Islam. If that was certainly easier than to convert Muslims, the task proved much more difficult than initially envisioned. The missionaries faced the resistance of the animists, obstructions from the colonial administration and the greater success of Islamic proselytising. Christianity made more thoroughgoing demands for changes in the traditional structures of local societies than Islam, and the process of conversion was a protracted affair dotted with courses, lectures and examinations. Unlike with Islam, where a convert became immediately integrated into the community and was supposed to learn the faith after conversion with the help of fellow Muslims, the Christian-to-be was left for months on end in an ambiguous situation during which he would learn the religion, with the risk that he could drop out of the process at any point in time. Moreover, such a cumbersome system could be implemented only by specialists, limiting the pace and reach of Catholicisation even after the solution of training local catechists was found. The initial strategy of targeting chiefs and other personalities important in local customary order having floundered – predictably, since these men were the guardians of traditional society – the missionaries focused on women and the youth, a fruitful move in the long run, but one which presented them with difficulties and complications during much of the colonial years. I have mentioned that the White Fathers sometimes colluded with the colonial authorities to thwart Islamisation. But the reverse – colonial officials colluding with Muslim leaders to thwart Catholicisation – was also true. Kouanda mentions the case of an administrator called Lasausse who, in the 1920s, imagined all sorts of measures to frustrate the efforts of the missionaries while deliberately supporting Islamisation (Kouanda 1997, 48).<sup>24</sup>

In final analysis, however, the decisive factor for the success of Catholicisation in Upper Volta was the weakening of former strong hierarchical political structures in a given population. If the Moose resisted to the efforts of the White Fathers, it was for the same reason which had long caused a similar failure of Islam, namely, their highly organised political system. With the colonial weakening of that system, both monotheisms could expand in Moaga society, and Islam progressed more rapidly primarily because Islamisation was a simpler process than Christianisation.<sup>25</sup> Among the Gurmance, whose society was less rigidly organised than that of the Moose, and especially among the populations of western Upper Volta – Binger’s *peuplades fétichistes* – Catholicisation scored its greatest victories in the colony. The rigours of colonialism also unwittingly helped the Fathers.

24 Lasausse went as far as inventing something called ‘billet de fiançailles’ (engagement note) which was used by men to claim back their fiancées from the mission buildings, emptying the latter of their female converts. The objective was chiefly to bolster the position of the traditional and Islamic authorities on the issues of dowry and polygyny, against the views of the White Fathers. During census operations, Lasausse would refuse to register Christian names, noting down traditional ones instead; however, he would accept Muslim names. In the main village of his district, he had a mosque built and formally inaugurated in August 1923.

25 E. P. Skinner’s study of the matter shows that Islam progressed more rapidly among the Moose than Catholicism, which in turn progressed more rapidly than Protestantism. The key variable producing these outcomes was the ease with which the three faiths were able to adjust to the requirements of a changing Moaga society, even as their proselytes acted on the presumption that it was Moaga society that was adjusting to their requirements (Skinner 1958).

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Thus, in the west, the French had artificially imposed ‘traditional chiefs,’ *inter alia*, in order to more easily mobilise young men for forced labour. The latter often fled to mission settlements, escaping by enrolling themselves as catechumens. Such events point toward the third and, arguably, most important pillar of Catholicisation in Upper Volta: charitable, social and educational work.

In this field of ‘indirect apostolate,’ the White Fathers built a network of mission schools, small manufactures, hospitals, maternities, and orphanages. The aim, here, was not conversion as such, since these institutions were accessible for Muslims as well, for instance. Yet by establishing them, the White Fathers threw the foundations of the Church’s strength in Burkina on two scores: first, they appeared useful and even indispensable in the eye of the colonial state; and second, they acquired a degree of legitimacy which they could not claim by appealing to history, like the Muslims or the traditional religions. Despite the anticlerical instincts of the colonial state, the mission schools were viewed favourably by the authorities because they were training staff employable in the modern economy and the public sector, supplementing the work of the very small number of government-funded secular schools. Unlike these schools, which could be created only on the miserable budget of the colony, the mission schools were private schools, which costed nothing to the colony and yet which educated its people free of charge. The ties that this gradually established with the colonial state grew even stronger as some of the former pupils of the mission schools working for the administration would become channels of influence or even spies for the Fathers, allowing the latter to gain enough understanding of what went on in government to fine-tune their plans and attitudes. The indirect apostolate also genuinely put concern for human suffering above the ‘temporal’ necessities of the struggle for Catholicisation. In the early 1930s, the charismatic Apostolic Vicar of Ouagadougou, Msgr. Thévenoud, agitated against the sale of daughters, a practice that had developed in the Yatenga in response to the pressure of colonial taxation in a time of drought and hunger. The campaign antagonised the colonial and traditional authorities and created difficulties for mission work in Ouahigouya, the capital of Yatenga, but Thévenoud eventually secured the reforms that ended the practice. Anecdotally, Msgr. Thévenoud is also reputed for having introduced the mango tree in Upper Volta. The most prominent representative of indirect apostolate was, however, the ‘Father Doctor’ Goarnisson, also known as ‘Père Lumière’ (Father Light) for his prominent role in the eradication of river blindness in Upper Volta and, more generally, the progress of medical science in tropical Africa.

Ultimately, the political influence of Catholicism in Upper Volta was cemented by an accident of history, the dissolution and reconstitution of the colony in the period 1932-1948. In response to the recession of the early 1930s, the French broke Upper Volta into three territories that were redistributed among the neighbouring colonies of Côte d’Ivoire, the French Sudan and Niger. Ouagadougou became the provincial capital of a subdivision known as Haute-Côte-d’Ivoire, which, moreover, was economically centred on Bobo Dioulasso. The policy ended the incipient development of laicisation in Upper Volta, as the secular superior regional school set up by the government was closed in 1933. In that same year, the White Fathers expanded their educational operations at Pabré, north of Ouagadougou, founding the great seminary that will later be moved to Koumi, near Bobo Dioulasso. Mission schools, including the purely religious ones, the seminaries, became the nursery of the Voltaic political and intellectual elite. Future President Maurice Yaméogo – not a very good student – and future historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo were both educated in Pabré and Koumi.<sup>26</sup> But the

26 In a later generation, Thomas Sankara, born in a Catholic family and educated in Catholic schools almost went to the seminary and his political philosophy, while remarkable for its neo-Marxist and pan-African substance, also has a deeper and subtler Christian/Catholic inspiration.

White Fathers at Ouagadougou quickly found that the dissolution of the colony disorganised their work and drained their religious constituency: ‘When you’ve got a nascent Christian community [*chrétienté*] and then half of it clears off, that doesn’t quite help in the development of the Christian community that you are taking care of,’ explained a veteran Father to Jean-Marie Bouron (Bouron 2010, 66). The White Fathers entered into a pragmatic alliance with the Moose kings of Ouagadougou and Ouahigouya (Yatenga) to lobby for the reconstitution of the colony. As has been shown by Bouron, their action in that regard was generally unobtrusive yet highly efficient, being in particular channelled into the more visible agitation of a secular political organisation, the Voltaic Union, after 1945. When Upper Volta was finally restored in 1948, Msgr. Thévenoud figured prominently in the official ceremonies, together with the Mogho Naaba, the leaders of the Voltaic Union and the newly appointed governor. Moreover, in the new ambiance of political liberalisation that had emerged in French West Africa after the Second World War, the colonial administration welcomed the candidacy of Father Goarnisson to a seat at the federal legislature in Dakar without levelling any accusations of clericalism. The much-revered medical prelate won the election and was instrumental in securing the public subsidies that the missionaries needed to expand their social and educational work, in an age when ‘social and economic development’ had become the official keyword of government policy. Yet, at the same time, political liberalisation also led to the emergence of a Voltaic political class which asserted its distinctiveness vis-à-vis both colonialism and the Church. While the Fathers sought to retain some of their moral control over their former pupils by combating the phenomenon that they colourfully labelled the ‘*grève de Dieu*’ (‘a strike against God’), they also took stance against the nationalist RDA, on account of its alliance with the French Communist Party, and tried to influence voters in the name of religion and patriotism. After RDA broke ranks with the communists, the Church mended fences and retreated from open involvement in politics, developing instead the strategy of back-door influence which has remained quite successful to this day.

So by the 1950s, much of what constitutes Burkinabe Catholicism had taken the forms that we know today. Its stronghold was among the minority populations of the western regions and it had achieved a strong showing in Ouagadougou and in the Gurmanche region to the east. Its relations with the state became defined by an odd mixture: first the legacy of French colonial secularism and anticlericalism, which has been transmitted to the post-colonial state as a form of institutional suspicion against religion (including Islam); and second, a pedagogical closeness to state elite, which had long enabled the Catholic priesthood acting as teacher and therefore influencing the country’s politicians, a teacher who may occasionally scold.<sup>27</sup> Burkinabe Catholicism draws from this position of a potent minority a high degree of self-confidence, which explains, to a great extent, why it is able to maintain such unworried relations with the majority religion.

### Consensual secularism in a new society

Elliott P. Skinner, the great American specialist of Moaga history and culture, closed his magisterial essay on the traditional constitution of Moaga monarchy by sounding the death toll for the institution he had studied. The book – *The Mossi of the Upper Volta: the Political Development of a Sudanese People* – was published in 1964, just seven years after the Mogho Naaba Kougri’s

27 After 1969, the Church closed most of its schools for financial reasons, and this ‘teacher’s influence’ is only symbolic of an attitude rooted in the past.

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ill-starred attempt to force the doors of the state on behalf of the Moose kings, and against the will of the elected government of the Upper Volta territory. After Upper Volta received self-rule in 1957, though not yet political sovereignty, it was clear: a new African nation was in the making. A question that was never clearly formulated, here as in other colonies, was – what would be the nature of the new state? The question was not formulated because those who were then making the decisions assumed that it would naturally be a civil state. In the political fevers of the 1950s, actors in Upper Volta had sometimes been clearly divided along confessional lines, with Muslim and Christian parties appearing on the stage. However, these were not real religious parties, since it was their membership that was confessional, not their ideology, and they would not have dreamt of establishing a religious state. The extant political ideas were all variants of African nationalism with inspiration coming from the dominant ideologies of Europe, i. e., liberalism and socialism. Ideas of African nationalism in Upper Volta cannot be said to have become an ideology and, arguably, they could never become one under leaders such as Daniel Ouezzin Coulibaly and Maurice Yaméogo – men who embraced their belonging to the emerging state bourgeoisie and had a conscious class interest in the subordination and quiescence of the masses. The civil state, copied from the French Fifth Republic, was therefore the expected endpoint of Voltaic political evolution at that juncture. Kougri wagered that an alternative, a civil state with strong traditional underpinnings, was possible, and a good idea.

His political project aimed at creating for the Moose kings and other traditional chiefs, as they were thenceforth called, the position of a privileged class, on par with the nascent state bourgeoisie. In an eloquent speech quoted by Skinner, Kougri declared that the intention of the chiefs was ‘not to leave the management of the country to the elected representatives alone, but to remain in close collaboration with them; for, if the elected representatives of yesterday have rights, the representatives of several centuries’ standing retain theirs also’ (Skinner 1964, 197). And he went on to complain that ‘while the lot of the civil servant has considerably improved, and that of the elected representative is at the summit of the pyramid, that of the chief has remained quite modest and quite comparable to that of the still miserable peasant – riches for the others, poverty for himself.’ Counting doubtless on his influence with those miserable peasants, who formed the main support of the Parti Socialiste d’Education des Masses Africaines, close to the chiefs, Kougri made several political moves to establish the ‘rights of the chiefs’ to be part of the state and of the new affluent class. He was rebuffed or ignored, and made a last ditch effort in October 1957, when he organised, at the Territorial Assembly, a colourful demonstration of a thousand traditional Moose warriors in arms, hoping to intimidate the government. In response to the challenge, the political parties signed a ‘truce,’ signalling the ‘unity of the democratic forces of the country’ (Skinner 1964, 200) and threatening retribution. The chiefs deserted the Mogho Naaba, who apparently conceded defeat. Like many scholars writing in the heyday of the ‘modernisation theory,’ Skinner believed that a defeat of that magnitude was definitive. When Upper Volta became independent, President Yaméogo made a speech in which a nonchalant allusion to the chiefs indicated that he thought them to be on the way out of history, and Skinner described Kougri as an impotent onlooker perched on the rafters, a mere citizen.

As we now know, Kougri and his colleagues will live to see Yaméogo consigned to the dustbin of history while the ‘Emperor of the Moose’ will become, in different ways, as powerful as ever. This is a complicated outcome which originates in some changes. After the colonial revolution, the Moose kingdoms did lose state power and sovereignty, and a new society with a different pecking order was born in the country now called Upper Volta. But what was the nature of that new society; and with what political ideas was it to be governed? The two previous subsections

have made clear that, by independence, neither state, nor society could be envisioned, in Upper Volta, as religious, largely because none of the two monotheisms had emerged from the colonial process as a clear bearer of cultural homogeneity. Indeed, by dealing with that question we should consider the fact that, in 1960, none of the monotheisms was even the majority religion in the country, since a whopping 76% of Voltaics were still animist (Bourgey 1970, 80).<sup>28</sup> Thus, for simple quantitative or statistical reasons, no ideological project of transformation of society could arise from the Muslim community, which was keenly aware of its *apud paganos* status. Thanks to their influence with the state, the Catholic hierarchy did attempt to exert moral guidance – something which French republicans would have lambasted as ‘clericalism’ – at the summit of the pyramid, to reprise Kougri’s phrase. But they were effectively cold-shouldered by the Yaméogo intent to protect the monopoly of state power (Bouron 2011). At the beginning of its independence, Upper Volta – now Burkina Faso – remained, therefore, primarily a land of cultural and religious pluralism, and, even as the monotheisms expanded, a form of default secularism gradually emerged as the main matrix of political norms in the country. In a society divided by religion, secularism is the alternative to conflict. However, it did not take, here, the accents of the anticlerical secularism which shaped French republicanism, although the law of *laïcité* was part of the institutional package of the Voltaic civil state. In the context of Upper Volta, the outcome was something which Jean-Marie Bouron describes as a form of consensual secularism, highlighting in particular ‘the difference between the discourse of competition articulated by the figures of religious authority and the discourse of consensus coming from secular Voltaics,’ who thus resist or appear indifferent to the pressure for religious antagonism coming from proselytisers (Bouron 2012, 33–52). While this is a unique situation in the Sahel, it also appears to be the one that most reflects the authenticity of the Sudanic experience, where, for centuries, plural societies had been governed by consensual political arrangements.

From this history, Burkina Faso has inherited problems that are fundamentally different from those of the other countries of the Sahel. It is not a case of a religious society governed by a civil state, since its society is, in fact, secular. But the consensual secularism of Burkina rests on a balance between Islam, Catholicism and traditional religions, which works to check the development of Islamic politicisation, Catholic clericalism or the assertiveness of traditional authorities. It is the dynamics sustaining that balance which explain the political quiescence of Islam in Burkina, and I now turn to examine their implications for the politics of Islam in the Sahel.

## The meanings of a non-political Islam

The different phases of the history of Islam in Burkina Faso since 1960 present some outward similarities with what is observable elsewhere in the Sahel. After a relatively tranquil decade in the 1960s, there were clashes between the Islamic establishment and Wahhabites in the 1970s, greater politicisation in the 1980s and – one would expect ‘radicalisation’ in the 1990s, as happened in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. In Burkina, however, changes in that fateful decade did not find expression in a political idiom that would propose to the people the alternative of a religious state. ‘Islam in Upper Volta has no specific project for the City. Its pressures are not centrifugal’ (Otayek

28 If correct, Bourgey’s statistics indicate an even greater resilience of animism than the ones collected in 1961.

1984, 317), René Otayek noted in 1984; twelve years later, in 1996, he concluded that Burkinabe Islam was 'still by and large a "quiet" Islam,' even though it was, he thought, an integral part of the 'Islamic revolution' which many believed was then brewing in the West African Sudan (Otayek 1996, 245). In the literature, there was indeed an expectation, even a degree of hopefulness<sup>29</sup> for ideological radicalisation among West Africa's Muslims, and when that failed to happen, there has been a need to explain the unanticipated or disappointing outcome in terms of repression and subjugation of Islam by hostile forces. In the case of Burkina Faso, allusions are generally made to the 'Christianised elite' running the state and to the political marginalisation of subordinated Muslims (in other countries of the Francophone Sahel, the 'Western-educated elite' more generally were thought to be the culprit). Such conclusions make sense if we start with the premise that an ideological radicalisation of some sort is the necessary endpoint of Islamisation, but my argument in this paper presents the issue in a very different way. Ideological radicalisation is here understood to be a struggle to control state power as a result of contradictions arising from social and political changes. Moreover, ideological radicalisation is possible only after a phase in which certain political ideas have been produced about those changes. Finally, the outcome of ideological radicalisation is not necessarily revolution or violent subversion, and can therefore appear as disappointing in the eye of the more radical ideologues – or, indeed, of expectant scholars. Following this argumentation, the fact that there have not been episodes of militant violence against the established order in Burkina by groups of Islamic ideologues does not necessarily mean that Burkinabe Islam is quiet and marginalised, even though it certainly did not develop any radical ideology similar to what happened elsewhere.

The evidence suggests that the early Muslim reaction to the changes brought about by colonisation and the birth of the Voltaic nation was a struggle primarily among Muslims to define what their response to those changes must be. Those struggles, although very divisive, also led to an empowerment of Burkinabe Islam thanks to the establishment of common organisations, independently from the state (unlike, for instance, in neighbouring Niger and Mali), as well as through the emergence of an entente with state leaders grounded in Muslim control of the country's trade economy. Muslim groups and organisations in Burkina continuously stressed their 'non-political' nature, from the 1950s right up to the present, meaning by this that they have no intention to challenge the civil state or, indeed, propose a 'project for the City' that would redefine the nature of Burkinabe society. Instead, they consistently offered their support to the successive rulers of the country, even during the tense period of the Burkina Faso Revolution where there was a feeling that Islam was '*mal aimé*' (unloved) by the state (but they were not the only ones to make such a complaint in that boisterous era!). If that support is indeed a sign of subordination to state power, it does not denote 'weakness' or a lack of political ideals. To understand the attitude of Burkina's Muslims, we must embed it into the perspective of state-society relations in the country.

At the end of the previous section, I asserted that Burkina started out at independence with a 'secular society.' While we nowadays tend to forget it, that was also the case of all the other countries of the Sahel. With the exception of Burkina, however, Islamisation in the Sahel meant

29 In the Otayek 1984 piece quoted above, we read that 'a major weakness of Voltaic Islam rested in its inability to transform its potential for resistance from the beginning of the century into an ideology of liberation and of conquest of political power' (Otayek 1984, 312) – but the scholar remained hopeful, ending his 'provisional conclusion' with news from an Islamic movement mustering strength in the parched locales around Dori. I find that there is a regional variance in the literature, meaning that these particular expectations – hopeful or not – being greater in scholarship from the North. In the case of Burkina, the work of scholars such as Assimi Kouanda or Issa Cissé can be contrasted with that of their Northern counterparts in that respect.



that a religious society was gradually substituted for the secular society of the early years of independence, and this social change was completed to various degrees in the political and economic conditions of the 1990s – the highest degree of change in that direction occurring in Northern Nigeria. Not coincidentally, it was at that juncture that an ideology of Shari'a emerged in those countries. The divergent Burkina outcome of a secular society is due to the fact that the situation of religious pluralism and balance that existed before/at independence is still extant today, despite the progress of Islam – which had been attended by a corresponding progress of Christianity, especially of Catholicism. Indeed, even if there are still more Muslims than Christians in Burkina, the proportions have changed in favour of Christianity. While the proportion of Muslims in the population has more than doubled between 1960 and today, the proportion of Christians has more than quintupled, signalling a dynamic that is also part of Burkina's social change. In countries like Niger, Senegal, or Mali, this sort of quantitative social change has happened exclusively in favour of Islam. Shari'a ideologues, in those countries, firmly ground their demands for political change in demographic data, gleefully citing the close to 99% figure which represents the Muslim population in their countries. They could claim – as they actually do – that the whole of society is their constituency. Such a position could not be asserted in Burkina without seriously threatening national unity. A consensus upholding the subordination of religion – including Catholicism – to the state was preferred to interreligious conflict for hegemony and the manufacturing of homogeneity. What then needs to be explained are the reasons for, and the nature of that preference. The Nigerian case indicates that the road taken by Burkina is not the only possible option if the post-colonial nation is religiously divided. Although some of the differences between the two countries may seem evident,<sup>30</sup> we still need to understand the mechanisms behind those differences and, in particular, to look for the operative causes of the Burkinabe way of dealing with heterogeneity. Among such operative causes, I will stress the fact that the sociological bases of Islam in Burkina – the trade economy – give to Muslims a strong stake in an entente with the state, and indeed a degree of influence that may well surpass that of the Catholics, despite the recurrent lament in the literature that Burkina is dominated by its 'Christianised elites.' Such an entente also exists in the other countries of the Sahel, but is perhaps more sharply discernible in the context of Burkina's plural and secular society.

### Autonomy and subordination

Colonisation and the birth of the Voltaic nation brought elements of revolutionary change within Islam in the area. First, they gave rise to a radical modernist criticism of the forms of 'traditional Islam' that had emerged from the *ancien régime* Islamisation process and grown during the colonial era; second, in the early years of the Voltaic nation, a radical popular Wahhabi criticism of both the modernist reformers and traditional Islam took shape. Latterly, a more intellectual Wahhabi current has emerged. The decades-long struggles and compromises between these different currents and doctrines have given to Burkinabe Islam its current visage, together with a generic moral project, but no common political platform. This outcome of a moral instead of a political project is impor-

30 The most obvious difference is that, in Nigeria, the secularising effects of religious pluralism were abated by the regional distribution of religious constituencies, with blocks of Christians and Muslims living in self-contained territories. Where this did not happen, in the Southwest, society was more secular and no Shari'a ideology took root.

tant to understand, not only because it defines the quiescent road taken by Burkinabe Islam, but also because it might offer an option for the rest of the Sahel as well.

As we have seen in the previous section, Islam grew rapidly in the colony of Upper Volta in contrast with centuries of marginalisation under the Moose kings and in the lands of the surrounding animist populations. This was a form of Islam shaped by the religious-political culture that had developed in the states founded by the Jihadists of the nineteenth century. In a context where illiteracy was the norm and relations with spiritual forces and expectations of the supernatural powerfully drove people's hopes and fears, the culture of Islam came to rest on the mediation of personalities distinguished by their spiritual superiority as holders of the divine blessing of the *baraka*, and by their mastery of mystical disciplines. This charismatic mediation was, and is still organised in the framework of Sufi orders, which created a system of spiritual clientage of the devout masses towards their teachers. The orders are hierarchical communities in which the bottom of the pyramid is made of the masses of the aspirants (*talibe* or *murid*) to spiritual awareness and mystical knowledge, and the top is populated by the descendants of the founder of the order, up to the apex which is the highest living guide, the Shaykh. Islam in colonial Upper Volta was dominated by the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya Sufi currents, which were quite common in West Africa at the time. Qadiriyya was initially well established in Liptako but declined in the early twentieth century before being finally overtaken by the Hamawiyya, a branch of the Tijaniyya doctrine. From its bases in Liptako and Yatenga, Hamawiyya became the mainstream Sufi order in Upper Volta, thanks to three *muqqadam* – deputized teachers of the Sufi path – who had received the Tijani *wird* – the delegation to minister to Tijani rituals – from the founder of Hamawiyya, Shaykh Hamallah. Despite hostility and persecution at the hand of the French for two decades in the 1930s and 1940s, Hamawiyya became entrenched in Burkina, spawning communities organised around clerical dynasties and their holy capitals. In Yatenga, for instance, the Hamawi follow the Maïga (formerly Sawadogo) family, with its seat in Ramatoullaye, a holy town north of Ouahigouya (Kouanda and Sawadogo 1993).

While Sufi creeds led to rupture with the traditional order of society, the new order they brought into being was – given the prevailing material conditions in the Sudan – one in which people were easily inducted. Despite the derisiveness of their critics, there were learned and bookish Sufi masters, but the transmission of the doctrines did not rely on literate culture and there were also many Sufi masters who were ignorant of the Islamic canon. Some of these were, nonetheless, revered and seen as saintly personages who enjoyed a mystical contact with divine wisdom. Colonial officials were generally scornful of the Sufi system, especially outside of its great centres of affluence and doctrinal refinement, in Senegal, and they were particularly severe about '*maraboutisme*, that is, magico-religious peddling. They considered much of West African Islam to be a combination of ignorance, charlatanism and fanaticism, and found their evidence in the illiteracy – in Arabic – of the common teachers of the Koranic schools, which were the first step into the religious training of most Sudanic Muslim children. In 1956, a French researcher in Ouagadougou found that 'out of 115 [religious teachers], only 14 said they understood [Arabic],' and since they were not very affirmative about it either, he concluded that 'this figure is certainly superior to the reality' (Mathieu 1956, 3).

The colonial criticism of West African Islam targeted different problems, including ignorance and the exploitation of the faithful by their religious guides, something which the colonial state was quite happy to condone when it served its interests, but more importantly, it led to the conclusion that the general backwardness of the Muslim masses had its origins in these problems. When coming from the outside, such views could be shrugged off as the biased judgment of unsympa-

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thetic foreigners. But when articulated from within the Muslim community, they became radical and subversive. Western-educated Muslims were exposed to the withering colonial-modernist discourse and their training predisposed them to accept it as 'objectively' true. They soon started to voice its attacks from an Islamic perspective, stirring up ideas of reform in the community. At the same time, pilgrimage to Mecca created two new sources of doctrinal criticism of 'traditional Islam,' as old style West African Islam came to be known. First, there were the wealthy merchants and the clients of the colonial state, who either could afford, or were offered a boat or plane ticket for the Hajj. In the Hejaz, these pilgrims were exposed to Wahhabism and brought its doctrines back with them in the early 1950s. Second, many poorer Muslims managed to find their way to Mecca in adventurous trips that took them years to make, often on foot. Some never reached the goal, and most of those who did found themselves stuck in the holy city, where they swelled the ranks of the beggars, hangers-on and indigent workers. In 1963, the Saudi kingdom decided to expel the Sub-Saharan migrants – for such they had effectively become – and, at the request of the CMHV, the Yaméogo government repatriated 210 Voltaics in 1963 and 1964 (Madore 2013, 61–62) – among them, Sayouba Ouedraogo, future imam of the Communauté Sunnite, a Wahhabi organisation.

In the 1950s, Western-educated Muslims and the well-to-do classes of Wahhabis had colluded in the criticism of traditional Islam, the first group resorting to the catchwords of its modernist critics, such as 'obscurantism' and 'charlatanism.' As such, they were interested in modernising Islamic education in terms of teaching methods and content, with the objective of blotting out 'superstitions' and reconciling Islam in Upper Volta with its 'rational' dogmas, as enunciated in the reformist Islamic omnibus. The second group also had purifying intents, albeit ones that were based on Wahhabism, and they therefore insisted on orthodoxy as ordered by the texts of the Salafi canon. There were clearly 'elective affinities,' to reprise Ousman Kobo's felicitous formula (Kobo 2009), between the two groups, which combined to form the early Voltaic Islamic reformism. However, in that period, Muslims also felt the need to develop an Islamic public space adjusted to modern conditions, including new mosques in durable construction materials and schools built on the model of the French-style schools, with classrooms, set times for teaching, examinations and certificates. Such a modern Islamic public space was seen as important in view of the advance taken by the Catholics in the control of the nascent state apparatus. The effort required unity to avoid retarding conflicts and to exert pressure on the authorities. Furthermore, despite their critical stance, the Western-educated reformists, lacking in theological credentials and often illiterate in Arabic – though literate in French – did not have a constituency in the religious community; and the Wahhabi merchants were open to compromise, given also their class interest for order and stability. Thus, through the 1950s, Muslims in Upper Volta adopted the conciliatory attitudes needed to finally make their way toward the establishment of a unified Muslim organisation, the Communauté Musulmane de Haute-Volta (CMHV), founded two years after independence, in 1962. As soon as CMHV was created, however, it was threatened by the influx of the repatriated 'migrants' in the two following years – ironically it was the CMHV who pressured the government to organise the influx.

The popular-class Wahhabis who had spent considerable time in Saudi Arabia – unlike the wealthier pilgrims – were more radical and uncompromising in term of their conception of religious doctrine and practice, and when they came back into the community, their preaching did not pull any punches against traditional Islam and the Sufi orders. Initially welcomed within CMHV, they attracted many followers in the popular classes and also some younger Muslim civil servants who were dissatisfied with the status quo created by the organisation. They were thus seen to threaten the position of the Muslim establishment, were quickly ejected from CMHV, and a heated

competition between them and all the other Islamic currents developed for the occupation of the Islamic public space. The outnumbered Wahhabis were, moreover, snubbed by the government. The state had developed ties with CMHV, considered as a national organisation representative of the majority of Muslims, and heeded their advice as a matter of course. Things eventually got to a head in early 1973 when, following a radio campaign of CMHV, there were scuffles in Ouagadougou and other places and serious fighting in Bobo Dioulasso, which led to the death of several Wahhabis and the ransacking of their mosques and properties (Otayek 1984, 310–311). At that time, Upper Volta was led by a Muslim president, Aboubacar Sangoulé Lamizana, who had initiated a pro-Arab policy and, in particular, a rapprochement with the oil-rich Gulf states. His response to the 1973 violence may have been influenced by these circumstances, especially at a time when the country was badly hit by the devastating Sahel drought of the early 1970s. At any rate, Lamizana authorised the Wahhabis to create their own organisation, the Mouvement Sunnite de Haute-Volta, which gave them the standing and legal protections of an official association. The measure of letting Muslims autonomously organise themselves turned into an institutional tradition or norm, something which – except for Nigeria – was not observable in the other countries of the Sahel.

One result of the new pro-Arab policy of Lamizana – breaking with the pro-Israeli policy of Yaméogo<sup>31</sup> – was that many more young Voltaic Muslims went for education in the Middle East with scholarships from Arab countries. In the 1980s, when they started returning, this led to some effervescence in the Islamic public space, but significantly, it appears that the greatest impact came here not from the example of the Iranian Islamic Revolution – which played an energising role in Muslim political consciousness in the other countries of the Sahel – but from the jolts of the Burkina Faso Revolution of 1983–87. Most of the new organisations set up in the 1980s had a reformist ethos, and it is at this juncture that the political ideas that would later have led to ideological struggle for a Shari'a state *should* have incubated. But such ideas were effectively redirected, as it were, into the intensely ideological project of the home revolution, led by Thomas Sankara. The revolutionary era, in Burkina Faso, was a period when the state sought to renew the founding social contract of the nation. Upper Volta had come to rest on a class coalition between the state bourgeoisie and the religious and customary authorities – plus, as we shall later see, the Muslim merchants –, incidentally, the very dispensation that the Mogho Naaba Kougri had proposed, and Maurice Yaméogo had rejected. Sankara wanted to dismantle that system and replace it with a developmental pact with the peasantry.

The responsibility of the state, in that view, was to mobilise all pro-revolutionary forces and root out the reactionary ones, and along them, fraud, corruption and injustice. To survive the storm and avoid being counted in the ranks of the reactionaries, the Muslim establishment toed the line of the revolutionary government. At Ramatoullaye, the secretary general of the Association Islamique Tidjane – an organisation set up in 1979 as Upper Volta's third Islamic association – praised the regime, pledging 'explicit support for the Burkinabe Revolution' (Madore 2013, 95) and others made similar declarations. But in their criticism of those who had stifled the energies of the people with 'anti-progressive teaching propagated everywhere across the countryside' (Sankara quoted

31 Yaméogo's pro-Israeli policy is presented in the literature as another sign of the state's disregard for Upper Volta's Muslims. However, it was more likely a sign of Yaméogo's 'accommodationist' investment into France's neo-colonialism. At the time, the former French colonies were divided between 'radicals' (such as Guinea) and 'accommodationists,' and the latter often cultivated an alliance with Israel, to a large extent to obtain its then famed security expertise against opponents and subversives. That was, for instance, the case of Niger's Muslim (but accommodationist) president, Diori Hamani, who, interestingly, dropped the Israeli connection and developed a pro-Arab policy in the early 1970s, at about the same time as Upper Volta.

by Labazée 1989, 18), the revolutionaries included charlatanic *maraboutisme* and obscurantist religion. This appealed to many among the young reformists, who realised the possibility of an alliance with the revolutionary government to overthrow the elderly leadership of the Muslim establishment – especially after Sankara himself said he considered the Prophet Muhammad to be a revolutionary on par with Lenin and Jesus (Labazée 1989, 21–22). The idea of ‘Koranic socialism’ was fleshed out, and, against the label of ‘obscurantism’ which still stuck to Islam, the reformists – and even some Wahhabis – stressed the enlightened content of the Qur’an. The irrational and superstitious notions which had brought disrepute to the religion, they argued, were innovations (*bid’a*) of traditional clerics. Moreover, Shari’a promoted social justice and personal integrity, the programme which orientated the revolution down to the utopian new name given to the country, Burkina Faso, ‘the Republic of the Upright.’ Reformists and Wahhabis were also encouraged to find a place in the revolution’s frame of action by Sankara’s diplomatic overtures towards the Gulf states, which led to renewed Islamic development funding and support for Islamic organisations in the country from those states.

The adherence of all the Islamic currents to the Burkinabe Revolution was also a further sign of the voluntary subordination of Muslims to the civil state, which is a hallmark of a secular society. This subordination, often expressed through the concept of ‘*apolitisme*’ (apolitical or non-political outlook), is in fact a political attitude of docility in matters sensitive to the state, which leaves the religious field open for struggle and interaction with society. This division between an unapproachable political field and a religious field where one was free to act was further stimulated by the liberal attitude of the Burkinabe state in regard to freedom of association – an attitude that had persisted during the revolution and continued under the Fourth Republic, the democratising regime installed by Blaise Compaoré in 1991. In that context, Islamic organisations and associated ventures proliferated, but their message remained within the bounds of the Islamic public space which, unlike in the other countries of the Sahel, did not overlay the national public space. In March 2015, the newspaper *Sidwaya* reported fights in a village during which Tijaniyya followers set upon Sunnites (Wahhabis) over the control of public prayer. When the news were posted on the website bayiri.com, many in the comments section wondered why Burkinabes should fight ‘for a religion that [had] come from afar’ and was promoted by a prophet who was not a Burkinabe.<sup>32</sup> In the year 2015, reactions of this nature are unthinkable anywhere in the Sahel except for Burkina. As this piece of news shows the hostilities between Sufi and Wahhabis continue, especially as the latter try to gain access to the rural areas, which they consider to be the ultimate preserve of traditional Islam.

At the national level, however, efforts at unification prevail, around a message that is essentially moral instead of being political. Shari’a, after all, covers not only governance, but also private conduct and interpersonal relations, and this domain offers ample matters for interaction between preachers and lay people, to the effect of educating Burkinabe Muslims to be better behaved and – a rhetoric inherited to a large extent from the revolutionary era – contribute to ‘the country’s socio-economic development.’ The need to avoid *fitna* – discord – and the emphasis on morality instead of political ideology has led to an agreement to disagree between the Sufis and the Wahhabis. Burkinabe Islam therefore tends to reproduce, internally, the now well-established attitude of polite silence about religion that exists between Christians and Muslims in the country.

32 Sidwaya of 13 March 2015, ‘Village de Ouarégou: affrontements entre Sunnites et Tidjania,’ <http://bayiri.com/societe/village-de-ouaregou-affrontements-entre-sunnite-et-tidjania.html>, last accessed 28 April 2016. The comments section has lapsed.

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Conditions are certainly not identical throughout the Sahel. The transition from the colonial to the national Church had considerably reduced – if not extinguished – the competition between Catholicism and Islam, especially as, unlike in Northern Nigeria for instance, religious pluralism runs through the family in Burkinabe society. While in all other Sahelian countries, cemeteries are categorised as Christian or Muslim, in Burkina, people are interred in the municipal cemeteries irrespective of religion. The symbolic weight of this fact, and what it tells us about the consensual secularism of Burkinabe society, cannot be overstated. Within the Muslim community, however, conditions of competition still obtain, sometimes even within the organisations that separate Muslims in different groups. Thus, the Ramaroullaye Hamawis do not speak with the same voice as the Hamdallaye Hamawis, and in April 1995, a quarrel within the Mouvement Sunnite led to a murder by firearm inside a mosque. Many quarrels also develop at the interpersonal, rather than doctrinal level, often for the control of resources and funds accruing to the organisations from the largesse of the Gulf states. An important element in regulating such rifts, and also establishing connections between the state and the Muslim community is the action of Muslim merchants.

### Moneyed ties

In the colonial period, Muslims had largely kept away from the state, especially since, after 1933, the type of education that led to government work was dispensed chiefly by the mission schools. As a result, Muslims were underrepresented in the public sector, and the colonial state also recurrently criticised them for disregarding agriculture. Yet it was recognised that they were very active, indeed overrepresented in trade, and when Upper Volta became independent, they gradually took control of the nation's trade economy. They created monopolies that rested on their hold on all segments of trading, from the import and transport of goods to their storage and retailing, and from the collection of products on rural markets to their domestic sale and export. Building on their old commercial traditions, the Muslim trading groups – the Yarse, Marensé and Dioula – adjusted their practice to the requirements of, and opportunities for accumulation in the modern context. The first generation of Burkina modern merchant capitalists started to build their wealth when the Voltaic state was in the crucibles, in the 1950s-1960s. That was for instance the case of the most famous of them, the Yarga Oumarou Kanazoé (Cissé 2016, 29–34), who had sufficiently consolidated his business during the 1960s to found his first company in 1973. By 1980, he owned two private planes and had successfully branched out from commercial accumulation into public works, with contracts in various West African countries. Later, he deployed his activities into mining and manufacture as well. Success in the trade economy in Burkina seems to require, or at least is made considerably easier by belonging to Islam. Issa Cissé mentions the case of Mamounata Velègda, a woman born in a Catholic family, who converted to Islam and is one of the wealthiest traders in the eastern regions of Burkina, which she represents at the chamber of commerce and industry in Ouagadougou.

This hegemonic control of the trade economy by Muslims is often glossed over in the literature or sometimes presented as something negligible, when a contrast is made between Catholic influence with the state and Muslim confinement to the 'informal economy.' Yet, we must differentiate between the trade economy, which is the biggest portion of Burkina's private sector and the basis of the wealth of its most successful businesspeople and companies, and the world of petty accumulation in neighbourhood shops or activities in artisanal manufacture and casual labour, which is generally understood by the term 'informal economy.' Muslim wealth did not open the doors of state offices to large numbers of Muslims, since formal French-style education remained a require-

ment for access to such positions, but it gave to the leaders of the Muslim community the robust influence on the state which they did not enjoy under colonialism. Like all capitalists, Burkina's merchant capitalists need a partnership with the state to thrive, that is to eliminate competition and create monopolies, secure insider information on future developments and policies, offset high degrees of risk-taking by high levels of political or official support and guarantee, and organise concentration under the protection not so much of the rule of law – a shaky concept in the Voltaic or Burkinabe would-be civil state – as that of friends in high positions.<sup>33</sup> The Burkina Faso Revolution's crusade against corruption and connivances jeopardised that partnership, to the extent that some of the Muslim traders moved a great part of their wealth to Abidjan or Lomé (Otayek 1996, 238), but it flourished again magnificently under the regime of Blaise Compaoré, when widespread corruption, money laundering, the extremely rewarding financing of the regime's funny business in wartime Côte d'Ivoire<sup>34</sup> and other troubled spots in West Africa, all cemented the unshakeable support of the Muslim leadership to the ruler.

The bigger Muslim merchants are influential in their community, not only through their large clientele and their business partners, but also because they offer financial support to religious and community activities. Thus, they founded in 1990 their own organisation, the Association Burkinabè pour le Développement de l'Islam (ABDI), a fundraising outfit intended to sponsor Muslim well-being and the growth of Islam. The merchants' influence transcended the doctrinal divisions of Burkina's Islam. The incident of 1995 in the Communauté Sunnite mentioned above was patched up mainly through the 'mediation' of Kanazoé, despite the fact that he himself was not a Wahhabi. Afterward, the members of the Communauté Sunnite started selecting merchants rather than Francophone intellectuals as presidents of their organisation, breaking with a tradition that dates back to its foundation in 1973 (Cissé 2014, 23). In 2004, Kanazoé became the president of the now venerable Communauté Musulmane and set out to found a federation of Burkina's Muslim associations, the Fédération des Associations Islamiques (FAI), which he endowed with a 15-million francs budget. The FAI, with its 119 affiliates, including the CMBF and the Mouvement Sunnite, is the closest that Burkinabe Islam got to have its own national Islamic council, the type of politically influential bodies of that name that were created in Mali and Niger about that time. Characteristically, in Burkina, the outfit came about through the autonomous agency of Muslims, and with the support of the merchant class, not the state. Yet, at the same time, the merchant class is close to the state and serves as a key channel of interaction between government and the Muslim community. In more than one way, this configuration appears as a modernisation of the *ancien régime* Moaga system, when the Yarse merchants were allowed to prosper by serving God and the king – even if the king was not a Muslim, which was the case of nearly all Burkina's heads of state.

33 For the theory underpinning this analysis, see Braudel's (1988) concept of capitalism as 'the anti-market' (*contre-marché*). The capitalism which inspired his reflections was merchant capitalism.

34 As an example, it was Burkinabe merchants who supplied the rebel-held areas of Côte d'Ivoire with food, consumer goods and fuel – with handsome profits and under the protection of Blaise Compaoré.

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## Conclusion

In the twentieth century, the various peoples of Burkina, with their political and social organisations, have undergone cataclysmic levels of change through the process of colonisation, or colonial modernisation, within just four decades. In 1960, when colonisation ended, they had melded into a new society, increasingly dominated by two foreign religions, and ruled by a state organised by the norms and principles of a civil state, starkly at variance with the customary political structures of the *ancien régime*. The agent of these changes, the colonial state, wittingly and unwittingly opened up the area to Islamisation and Christianisation, a dual process which carried the potential of struggles for the establishment of a religious state. However, the resistance of the peoples to conversion combined with the ambivalent attitudes of the colonial state towards the two monotheisms presented them with more urgent problems of expansion and consolidation in an ambience of competition. Moreover, the emerging social order was one in which modernist notions of civil governance, which entailed secularism and some fencing off of customary rights and obligations, became the philosophy of the new elites. This put paid to Catholic hopes of exerting moral guidance over the nascent state under the auspices of Mary Immaculate, while Islamic resistance to colonialism increasingly appeared as a rear-guard action, marred, moreover, by the ‘retarding’ effects of Sufi doctrines on Muslims in the area. As a result, the first ideological struggle related to Islamisation took the form of doctrinal infighting to define the nature of Voltaic/Burkinabe Islam and give it a unity so that it could cope with the changing conditions of the modern age.

The country emerged from the colonial process as accommodating a plural society with plural religious orientations. Moreover, given the civil philosophy that underpinned state sovereignty – asserting that power rested in ‘the people’ – no subdivision of society could claim inherent rights to power, either in the name of tradition, as the Mogho Naaba Kougri bitterly learned, or in the name of God. In this context, the politics of religion meant either a form of subordination to the sovereignty of the civil state, or a form of antagonism that might lead to radicalisation and conflict. The same problem was posed in all the countries of the Sahel, and responses vary. In Upper Volta/Burkina Faso, both Islam and Catholicism – which was not studied here beyond its formative decades during colonisation – chose subordination to the state while attempting to influence its policies in regard of their religious interests. Moreover, while the Catholic hierarchy also developed a role as a member of civil society – in the conventional sense of rights-defending organisations – and often appeared critical of state rulers, the Muslim leadership was generally (and sometimes actively) supportive of the state rulers. In both cases, therefore, subordination was preferred to conflict. But Catholic subordination was often critical, and Muslim subordination, generally supportive. The Muslim attitude – which is the one that interests us here – has several causes and a number of implications.

The primary cause was that, despite its rapid progress, Islam long remained a minority religion in the country, becoming the majority faith only very recently, in the 1980s or perhaps even later, in the 1990s. Secondly, Christianity, now the second largest religion, has a larger constituency in the state bourgeoisie and shares the social space with Islam and animism. This latter factor creates a context of social integration in which interreligious conflict would threaten the social fabric and needed to be avoided. Therefore, a form of consensual secularism that recognises the importance of the sociological bases of Christianity – the state bourgeoisie and the modern sector of the economy – as well as religious pluralism in society, checks the politicisation of Islam. Thirdly, Islam’s sociological bases in the merchant class and the informal economy turn the civil state into a needed



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partner rather than an antagonist of Muslims. Merchants seek the support of the state in their quest for accumulation, while actors in the informal economy enjoy its policy of non-interference, even if that means fiscal impotence and the inability of the state to develop transformative economic strategies. And fourthly, the continuous heterogeneity of the Islamic scene, divided between competing doctrines – modernist reformists, Wahhabis, Sufis – and also between factions within the autonomous organisations set up to represent these doctrines focused the minds of Muslim activists on the community's internal politics. Despite their divisions, or perhaps thanks to them, these doctrines and organisations have developed a vibrant Islamic public space which absorbed much of their energies, and given the conditions described above, their leaders accepted the notional separation between a religious and a political sphere that is crucial to the operation of a civil state. As a result, they offer a moral project for society, as a contribution to Burkina's 'socio-political development,' but they refrain from developing a political project.

This political impassivity – which many scholars find peculiar – is the direct cause of Burkina's quiescence in relation to Islamist ideological radicalisation. But we must be careful what we mean by impassivity and quiescence. The acceptance of a boundary between the political and the religious spheres does not mean that Muslims – or Christians for that matter – will be politically uninvolved, but simply that their political involvement will not be grounded in a radical project of changing the state from a civil into a religious entity. When scholars are surprised that Muslims in Burkina do not develop a radical Islamist ideology, it is because they start with the premise of a more or less pronounced degree of incompatibility between being a Muslim and being a citizen. This premise is justified by the fact that the Shari'a organises a religious society in which personal conduct is determined by prescriptions coming from God, and therefore superior to any human sovereignty, including the changing will of the people. Just as the early Catholic missionaries in Upper Volta gladly surmised that there was an incompatibility between being a Moaga and being a Muslim – not seeing that this could also mean that there was an incompatibility between being a Moaga and being a Christian – one may be forgiven to suppose that a Muslim cannot be a citizen, i. e., a politically active member of a civil society governed by a civil state. Yet, the Moose became Muslims and Christians – while remaining unmistakably Moose. And under the conditions extant in Burkina, it has proved possible for Muslims to be both unmistakably Muslims, and yet citizens of a non-religious state – certainly in easier ways than in the other countries of the Sahel.

In the autumn of 2014, and later, in the final weeks of the summer of 2015, the Burkinabe twice mobilised to oust the despotic Blaise Compaoré and to defeat his state-paid militia, the infamous presidential security regiment, which was trying to engineer a restoration of the fallen regime. The episodes repeated the popular mobilisation that had similarly ended the reign of Maurice Yaméogo in January 1966. In all three cases, the Burkinabe mobilised across the national territory, in towns and villages, irrespective of ethnic or religious identification, and their mobilisation continued until they threw down the ruler. Although the Compaoré regime had its supporters, they could not defend it in the face of the national and civic outrage at the levels of injustice and mockery for the law which it had reached. I happened to travel within Burkina during the tense 2015 epilogue and the public transportation vehicle in which I was making my trip out of the country was unaccountably blocked for a whole day at the entrance of Dori, in the Liptako, by enraged citizens. Nothing much was happening in Dori, given that all the action – the showdown between citizens and the heavily-armed regiment men – was set in the capital, but people in the remote provincial town wanted to symbolically mark their participation to the civic uprising, even if they had no physical enemy to fight against. In Burkina, the 'will of the people' is not theoretical as it often is

elsewhere in the region,<sup>35</sup> but it is a will for a better civil state, not for its replacement by a religious or an ethnic state. Until now, no bodies of political ideas have emerged to successfully<sup>36</sup> speak for the people's desire for change, so that most of the social injustice and political ineptitude of the Compaoré regime will continue under the new leadership. But these recurring events, including the revolution of the 1980s, clearly indicate that in the conditions and circumstances of Burkina, and despite a general reverence for religion and tradition, change comes only in the name of the people, not of God.

35 For an attempted analysis of this Burkinabe exception, see R. Otayek (1992). The subject still waits for a deeper analysis.

36 Burkina's intellectual class is a hotbed of political ideas, understudied as such, but these have never succeeded to relate concretely to passions and interests – to reprise Hirschman's concept – in the larger society.

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