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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/33413>

DOI : 10.4000/etudesafriaines.33413

ISSN : 1777-5353

Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 15 mars 2021

Pagination : 218-221

ISBN : 9782713228766

ISSN : 0008-0055

Référence électronique

Melina C. Kalfelis, « DEGORCE Alice, KIBORA Ludovic & LANGEWIESCHE Katrin (DIR.). — *Rencontres religieuses et dynamiques sociales au Burkina Faso* », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [En ligne], 241 | 2021, mis en ligne le 15 mars 2021, consulté le 22 avril 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/33413> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.33413>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 22 avril 2022.

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DEGORCE Alice, KIBORA Ludovic & LANGEWIESCHE Katrin (DIR.). — *Rencontres religieuses et dynamiques sociales au Burkina Faso*. Dakar, Amalion, 2019, 344 p., bibl., ill.

- 1 Tolerance, integrity, plurality—these are some of the ideals that Thomas Sankara had in mind when he changed the name of the former French colony of Upper Volta to Burkina Faso. The word *burkina* derives from the Mooré language (Fr.: *hommes intègres*), while *faso* is Dioula (Fr.: *pays*). The name therefore draws on two of the most commonly spoken languages in the country, which in itself symbolizes cultural and religious plurality. This plurality is Burkina Faso's most unique selling point. It feeds into one of many anecdotes underpinning the most idealizing and powerful narratives about the country, namely that no other African state can look back on such a peaceful, postcolonial history and that fewer still are such splendid examples of inter-ethnic and inter-religious peace. Unquestionably, these narratives are the product and engine of the nation's own self-conception, narratives that to some extent have led politicians to work towards a balance of plurality since decolonization, a balance distinguishing politics in Burkina Faso from those of other Sahelian countries (p. 316).
- 2 Although these narratives are fraught with pitfalls and idealized notions, it used to be difficult to entirely dismiss them as a myth. However, in recent years a growing gap has opened up between the ideal of cultural plurality in the country and its social reality. Moreover, along with this gap, an intellectual void has been widening, one marked by

the failure of most scholars to comprehend how Burkina Faso has become a new zone of violence and inter-communal conflict in the Sahel so incredibly quickly. It is this void that the edited volume *Rencontres religieuses et dynamiques sociales au Burkina Faso* aims to fill by tracing the rich history and plural configurations of religion in Burkina Faso. To allay any preconceptions right at the beginning of the book, Benjamin Soares stresses in his preface that Burkina Faso has always been “le théâtre de changements considérables et parfois dramatiques dans le domaine religieux” (p. xvi). With this in mind, the goal of the book is threefold. First, attentive to detail, it traces the history, beliefs and ideological transformation of different religious streams in Burkina Faso from the colonial period to the present day. Secondly, the chapters provide insights into the entangled nature of “traditional” beliefs in Burkina Faso and the role its authorities and rituals play today. Finally, the book uses religion as an empirical as well as analytical entry point to a better understanding of the interactions, political power plays and different levels of competition and polarization that drive social division, exclusion and radicalization in the country.

- 3 The title of the introduction, “La pluralité—et après?,” already guides the reader towards the book’s two major future-oriented goals, dealt with in two large parts. The first part consists of three sections: “Courant religieux contemporains,” “L’islam au Burkina Faso” and “Les christianismes au Burkina Faso.” The second part consists of one major section with the title “Religions et dynamiques socio-politiques.” While the word “religion” does not exist in the languages spoken in Burkina Faso (p. 20), “tradition” and “culture” do. In the first section, the editors thus start off by tracing the meanings of the latter two terms in the country’s different regions and languages. This is followed by a reconstruction of the entanglements of African belief systems with Islamic and Christian practices and a discussion about the marginalized and sometimes conflictual significance of those beliefs today. The second and third sections then focus on historical and recent religious configurations, biases and transformations of Islamic and Christian currents in Burkina Faso. The first section is on Islam. It concentrates on how processes of emancipation and religious rigor are simultaneously unfolded (chapter 2), how normatively loaded streams of Sufism descend, often silently, into the material culture and practices of believers (chapter 3), and on how Francophone Islamic reformism aims to promote its modest religious visions transnationally (chapter 4). The section on Christianity offers the reader in-depth knowledge of the history and social engagement of Catholic and Evangelist associations in Burkina Faso (chapters 6 & 7) and ends the section with the dogmatic-radical tendencies and political ambitions of Burkinabe charismatic churches (chapter 8).
- 4 Although the chapters in the first part treat the different religious groups and streams separately, the fluid, relational nature of religion and its sociopolitical significance in Burkina Faso shine through, taking center stage in the second part of the book as well. In contrast to the emphasis on the multiplicity of religious thought in the first part of the book, chapter 9 introduces the second part with power struggles around statistics on religion in Burkina Faso as well as its epistemological constraints. The following two chapters then move towards developmental issues, highlighting the significance of religion in the private education sector (chapter 10) and the “NGO-ization” of religious initiatives in Burkina Faso (chapter 11). The state’s efforts to maintain a balanced relationship with the different religious authorities through different periods since decolonization—“le jeu d’équilibrisme” (p. 264)—as well as the government’s politically secular orientation, is discussed in greater depth in chapter 12. This is followed by an

examination of the media as one of the main spaces of competition between the country's different religious streams, ideas and initiatives (chapter 13). The last chapter (14) before the conclusion then digs deep into the history of *jihad* in Burkina Faso and points out that those who act in its name are deeply involved in plural conflicts surrounding powerful traditional families, old ethnic rivalries and complex global networks of Islamic doctrine.

- 5 The chapters leave not the slightest doubt about how crucial it is to understand religious transformation in order to grasp the dynamics of the most recent conflicts in Burkina Faso. Is it possible that we, as academics, have turned a blind eye to the seeds of radicalized ideologies that had been planted long before the violence was exacerbated? After some summarizing remarks, this is the main question the conclusion raises in its critical reflections on how we as academics produce knowledge about terrorism and political violence in the Sahel and beyond. While scholars working on these conflicts tend to stress sociopolitical, state-centered and identity-based explanations for violence, the conclusion argues that they tend to play down the influence of religion. This is precisely the line of argument the edited volume does not indulge in, and it is one of the book's strongest achievements that it breaks consciously with the practice of merely recycling of knowledge. Using the lens of religion, each chapter pays attention to political and social factors, but it does not assume that these factors are the only root of conflict in the country. Instead, cautiously and sensitively, step by step, the chapters remind the reader that the denial of religious radicalization within currents of both world religions, Islam and Christianity, is no less a problem of idealization than the notion of cultural multiplicity. By nudging the reader to reflect on whether the focus on the political and social drivers of conflict is not a politicized problem in itself, the chapters not only raise issues for future research, they also suggest the need for a stronger interdisciplinary dialogue and more critical reflections on our own assumptions.
- 6 The way the book draws on recent epistemological limits in academia is another of its great achievements, though it could have been given even more attention throughout the various chapters. The same applies to the processual, interactive and relational approach the volume adopts in studying the dynamics of religion in Burkina Faso. While this is very timely and broadens the horizon for future research, the conceptual framework could have been applied more consistently in the introduction and maintained throughout the sections in order to strengthen the relatedness between the different disciplines and chapters. Instead, as the conclusion remarks, many chapters deliberately remain "descriptive and explicative" (p. 313), which always has its own appeal and omissions: the detailed historical documentation and description of the various religious currents unquestionably render this book a basic work not only for academics and students who want to conduct research on religion in Burkina Faso, but also for scholars who aim to improve their understanding of the evolving dynamics of dogmatism and radicalization in the region. This detail in the accounts, according to the introduction, is the outcome of a fostered dialogue between experts on Islam and Christianity respectively, who do not come into dialogue very often (p. 9). For those readers for whom religious studies are not their usual interest, this is a striking observation that deserved more explanation. It is also these readers who might be more interested in the social than the religious dynamics of Burkina Faso, for whom the detailed accounts of the different religious currents and histories in the first part of the volume might prove rather tedious to read. A last aspect missing between the lines is

more detailed information about the various authors' disciplines, approaches and methodologies. Without examining the contributors' information, it is difficult to look behind the curtain of the text and grasp the chapter's disciplinary and epistemological entry points. This criticism also extends to the fact that the three editors of the volume (co-)authored seven of the book's fourteen chapters without describing why this was the case.

- 7 None of these criticisms do anything to reduce the quality of the volume overall. Alice Degorce, Ludovic O. Kibora and Katrin Langewiesche have edited a book that has long been overdue, as it provides nuances to our understanding of the religious dimensions of social and political interactions in Burkina Faso. Of particular benefit to the wider discourse on the so-called Sahel crisis is the volume's focus on daily interactions. This illuminates religious currents and broadens the horizon regarding the daily dynamics of dogmatism, exclusion and radicalization in Burkina Faso. Coupled with insights into the actual ambitions and practices of the actors involved, the volume not only adds new perspectives to the intersection of politics, religion and sociability, but brings life to the structural and ideological dynamics involved. All these achievements make the book essential reading for scholars from all disciplines, policy advisors, analysts and development experts, and indeed to anyone seeking situated in-depth knowledge of the processes that are fostering the rapid spread of violence in the region.

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