

MUSLIM MINORITIES IN SOUTHERN CITIES OF BENIN AND TOGO

FRÉDÉRIK MADORE

I joined UF in October 2018 as a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow shortly after having defended my thesis. I spent much of the past year finishing my dissertation, “Rivalités et collaborations entre aînés et cadets sociaux dans les milieux associatifs islamiques en Côte d’Ivoire et au Burkina Faso (1970-2017),” in history at the Université Laval. My dissertation entailed a comparative historical study of the role of Muslims from marginalized social categories in the transformations of Islam in these two countries since the 1970s. The parallel religious demography of the two cases—with Islam as a majority religion but one that has historically been in a subordinate political role—makes the comparison of these two specific cases a very compelling one. Adopting an interdisciplinary research approach, I conducted ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in Ouagadougou and Abidjan (2014–2015) along with using national newspapers and documents produced by Islamic organizations. I argue that “social cadets” from various sociocultural backgrounds and theological currents renegotiated power relations to claim a more important place in the religious field through a process marked by advances—much more noteworthy in Côte d’Ivoire than in Burkina Faso—and setbacks. I also employed different conceptualizations of agency, as well as the ideas of an “Islamic public sphere” and a “civil Islam” to interrogate the plurality of ways in which Muslim youth and women engage in Islamic activism. In the end, I conclude that these actors have been at the forefront of promoting new forms of religious civic participation and entrepreneurship for socio-economic development in addition to creatively using media.

My new research project focuses on the history of Muslim minorities in southern cities of Benin and Togo since the Independence era. Apart from Côte d’Ivoire, the history of Islamic communities in the Christian-majority and francophone areas of the Gulf of Guinea—such as in



Benin and Togo—remain mostly unknown. Even if Pentecostal, evangelical, and charismatic churches seem to be exerting the most visible growing political influence in these two countries, Islam has nonetheless also seen considerable progress in the religious landscape, especially in large coastal cities such as Cotonou, Porto Novo, and Lomé. This religion—now accounting for 20–25% of the population in each country—has also recently attracted attention for an apparent Islamic awakening. In Togo, the new opposition figurehead of the unprecedented anti-government protests that spread across the country in 2017 has been regularly accused of links to Islamist radicals by pro-government leaders. In Benin, following the major mobilization of the Muslim community in 2017, the government had to reverse a ban on occupying public streets for prayers. From March 2019, I will be conducting fieldwork in Benin and Togo.

I am also currently working with the Academic Research & Consulting Services group at UF to develop a digital database containing archival materials, newspaper articles, Islamic publications, and photographs related to Islam in Burkina Faso.

Despite the recent surge in popularity for the digital humanities, very few projects to date have sought to seriously mobilize the potential for digital tools to develop research on Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. Although African archives in the postcolonial era are usually scattered, disorderly and partial, it is quite possible to build a rich corpus of written sources despite the numerous difficulties. In the course of doctoral research, I digitized and organized more than 7,000 newspaper articles on Ivorian and Burkinabe Muslim communities, along with material from some 1,000 varied Islamic publications, to create a database containing more than 12,000 items. I will use Omeka, a free digital library management platform which allows the web-publishing of files of different types (video, audio, image, text) and their identification by assigning metadata, keywords and even geotagging for a browsable map. This allows users to do a simple tags or full-text search (possible with the OCR) as well as advanced searching across all items.

Frédéric Madore is a Banting postdoctoral fellow in the Center for African Studies. Funding provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).