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Muriel Gomez-Perez

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Women’s Islamic activism in Burkina Faso: toward renegotiated social norms?

Muriel Gomez-Perez

Department of Historical Sciences, Laval University, Quebec City, Canada

ABSTRACT
Recent studies have described the active participation of women in local associations as well as in public and national debates about secularism, the Family code, and women’s rights within Islam. In this article, I explore how female preachers have claimed a new role for women within Islam through a better knowledge and understanding of Islamic texts. In doing so, these women drew on modernist speeches made by men, used the media and aligned themselves with international movements with the aim of claiming a new social identity for their sisters in Islam, establishing greater equality between men and women in the religion, and finding a way of being a good mother and woman while maintaining an independent social position. In fact, these female preachers sought to spark a quiet yet real social revolution in religion by casting a critical and modernist eye on local cultural traditions and Islamic identity.

RÉSUMÉ
Des études récentes ont décrit la participation active des femmes à des associations locales ainsi qu’à des débats publics et nationaux sur la laïcité, le code de la famille et les droits de la femme au sein de l’Islam. Dans cet article, j’examine la manière dont les prédicatrices ont revendiqué un nouveau rôle pour les femmes au sein de l’Islam grâce à une meilleure connaissance et compréhension des textes islamiques. Ainsi, ces femmes se sont inspirées de discours modernes faits par des hommes, ont utilisé les médias et se sont alignées sur des mouvements internationaux dans le but de revendiquer une nouvelle identité sociale pour leurs sœurs dans le cadre de l’Islam, d’établir une égalité accrue entre les hommes et les femmes dans la religion et de trouver le moyen d’être de bonnes mères et femmes tout en conservant une position sociale indépendante. En fait, ces prédicatrices ont cherché à déclencher une révolution sociale calme mais réelle en portant un regard critique et moderne sur les traditions culturelles et l’identité islamique.

KEYWORDS
Burkina Faso; Islam; preachers; women; agency

MOTS CLÉS
Burkina Faso; Islam; prédicatrices; femmes; libre-arbitre

CONTACT
Muriel Gomez-Perez  muriel.gomez-perez@hst.ulaval.ca

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Like most countries of the Sahel, Burkina Faso is undergoing a significant wave of Islamic renewal. New Islamic associations and networks are burgeoning, while both Sufi brotherhoods and formal Muslim organizations that have deeper historical roots in the country are adapting to new circumstances. In this context of growing Islamic activism, this paper explores the roles that women have played and continue to play. Whereas many researchers have treated Islamic brotherhoods, associations and movements as gender-neutral entities, reifying them by the same token, this article pays close attention to the trajectories of various female Islamic activists over three decades in Burkina Faso. It highlights two interrelated processes: the agency of female activists, who challenge existing gendered religious hierarchies, and the limits that constrain their capacity to radically transform gender relations.

Before proceeding to the main arguments, a brief historical discussion is in order. In Burkina Faso, various brotherhoods and associations have played an important role in the emergence and establishment of Islamic activism. The “12 Grains” Tijâniyya brotherhood has had a deep impact on the country’s religious landscape (Kobo 2009, 2012). However, its Hamawiyya (“11 Grains”) counterpart has probably made the greatest contribution to securing Burkina Faso’s place within the umma (Dassetto, Laurent, and Ouédraogo 2012; Savadogo 1998). In particular, one of its representatives, Sheikh Aboubacar Doukouré, has been developing strong relationships throughout the North African and Middle Eastern Muslim world since the 1980s.1 In this context, assistance received from the Arab world has significantly shaped the Muslim community’s network of privately-run schools (madrasas; see Cissé 1990, 1994, 2012; Sama 1992), supported the emergence of new male and female Islamic figures, and increased the visibility of Islam within social initiatives led by local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs; see LeBlanc, Audet-Gosselin, and Gomez-Perez 2013; Vitale 2009).

Moreover, several Islamic associations took on a leading role in the religious life of Burkina Faso. Firstly, the Communauté musulmane de Haute Volta (CMHV, established in 1962 and renamed Communauté musulmane du Burkina Faso, CMBF, in 1982) has contributed to Islam’s increased visibility in towns and cities through its management of most of the country’s urban mosques (Gomez-Perez 2009; Kouanda 1998) and madrasas (Cissé 2012). Ouagadougou’s central mosque, managed by the CMBF, has also been a key location for the training of female preachers. Secondly, the emergence of a new Wahhabi-inspired association, the Mouvement Sunnite (officially established in 1973; see Cissé 2009; Dao 1991; Koné-Dao 2005), was encouraged by the return to Upper Volta of Muslims who had studied in Saudi Arabia. The organization brought profound change to the religious landscape. Beyond promoting religious practices that more closely followed the core Islamic texts (Qur’an and Sunna; see Kobo 2009, 2012), its members challenged the hegemony of the CMHV by seeking control of certain mosques, building new places of worship that helped give Islam even more prominence, and ensuring a presence for Islamic activism within the public sphere (Madore 2013). Furthermore, these activities increased the visibility of a new generation of Arabic-educated activists who had been educated in madrasas and Arab-Islamic universities.

Moreover, the visibility of Islam in Africa has increased since the 1990s (Gomez-Perez 2005; Kane and Triaud 1998; Moghadam and Sadiqi 2006; Soares and Otyayek 2007), in particular in the media (Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Salvatore and Eickelman 2004). In Burkina Faso, the deregulation of telecommunications networks, which has been underway since the beginning of the 1990s, has been accompanied by the creation of new Islamic media
While there were already several Islamic newspapers, the first private radio station in Ouagadougou was launched in December 2004. Radio Al Houda was in large part financed by Ben Massoud, an Islamic foundation based in Saudi Arabia. A second radio station, *Ridwâne pour le développement*, was launched in March 2010 by Sheikh Aboubacar Doukouré. These new media gave exposure to emerging religious figures, including women who belonged to different generations and various Islamic movements.

Researchers have recognized how, in Burkina Faso, women educated in French-language institutions (“the white man’s schools”) and who pursue the studies necessary to become civil servants … have begun to reread Islamic texts with an eye to exposing the principle of gender equality and to fight against masculine interpretations of Islam. (Saint-Lary 2016).

Other women “have been motivated by the quest for knowledge, the desire to form social bonds and earn money” (Saint-Lary 2012, 153). By contrast, this research focuses on Arabic-educated women whose reality is shaped by very different social norms. In light of this fact, the article explores two key phenomena. First, there is the degree of autonomy exercised by these women – I can even speak in terms of agency insofar as some of them have proven capable of challenging the status quo, even when faced with coercion. Second, I focus on the extent to which this agency is experienced unevenly, is in a constant state of evolution, and is subject to certain limits.

In this context, the concept of agency allows us to highlight how some female preachers, at specific points in their lives, became religious agents of such importance that they can be considered pioneering figures in Islamic activism. More broadly, the concept offers two key advantages. It not only “provides a window on how individuals, by their choices and actions, give shape and form to the structures of society … even as they participate in their ongoing, gradual transformation” (Leming 2007, 74), but, more importantly, it also reveals how these female figures “have a subjective awareness of the significance of their position in terms of the limits and possibilities it poses” (75). This is in line with how Mahmood (2005, 5) rightly insists that agency must not simply be observed in “acts that challenge social norms” but also in “those that uphold them.”

The research on which the article is based was conducted in the city of Ouagadougou, home to the Mouvement Sunnite and Al Itihad al Islami, the Islamic associations in which the Arabic-educated women whose experiences are discussed were active, as well as the Al Houda and Ridwâne radio stations, where some of the women hosted programmes. Between 2009 and 2013, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. In order to undertake a longitudinal analysis of the Islamic dynamics at play, different cohorts of female preachers were interviewed, including those who preached in the media as well as those who did not but who, through their participation in associations, broadened the understanding of key issues relevant to the status of women (female genital mutilation, family planning, birth spacing, forced marriage). Other respondents were also met with, who had contact with female preachers.

The article begins by identifying the different stages of women’s Islamic activism from the 1970s to the present. In discussing these stages, the life stories of several Islamic figures are expounded, making it possible to better appreciate the commitment shown by female preachers. After this, the article discusses how these women’s activism and public speaking reflected something of a paradox: on the one hand, they reinforced normative religious
discourses on the role and status of women; on the other hand, female preachers also engaged in a recodification of social norms, subtly calling on their fellow Muslim women to become conscious of their rights.

I Pioneering women and Islamic activism

Beginning in the 1970s, as Upper Volta sought closer ties with the Arab-Islamic world, some women in the country began to participate in Islamic activism. These Muslim women progressively organized themselves into neighbourhood groups in order to read and understand the Qur’an, as well as to learn religious practices together. This feminization of religious activism has been observed throughout Africa and elsewhere in the Muslim world (for West Africa, see Alidou 2005; Augis 2002, 2005, 2009; Bop 2005; LeBlanc 2009; Mbow 1997; Masquelier 2008, 2009; Rosander 1997; Sanankoua 1991; Schulz 2003, 2011, 2012). In Burkina Faso, there have been four main stages of women’s Islamic activism.

The first stage involves the promotion of women’s Islamic education, which has remained a priority right up to the present day. The women who were interviewed consistently described improving women’s knowledge of Islam and teaching them religious practices as key objectives, which were primarily accomplished through reading the Qur’an in Arabic and understanding it with the help of Mossi-language commentaries. Women gained an even deeper knowledge through commentaries on certain hadîths (sayings of the Prophet), especially those most directly related to the role and the status of women. This approach influenced the preaching strategies used in both the domestic and later the public sphere. Thus, women began by preaching within their close family circles, reading Sîra (the Life of the Prophet) from the Qur’an. Later, they would preach to others in the neighbourhood. As news of their activities spread by word of mouth, they became integrated into a network of community associations and gained recognition for their religious expertise. They also began preaching to larger, mixed (male and female) groups, providing commentaries on the Sîra and the hadîths.

In this context, one woman emerges as a pioneer of Islamic activism. In fact, Oumi was the first female preacher in Burkina Faso, beginning in 1971. Initially educated by her father, an important marabout, she went on to study under several different well-known religious leaders who taught her to read and understand Arabic. This was identical to the situation in Mali, where Dorothea Schulz has described how, beginning in the 1970s, “few elite women … from families of religious specialists and merchants engaged in this form of learning” (2006, 140). Oumi completed her education by travelling abroad (to Lebanon, Sudan, Arabia, etc.) with the support of her father and, later, her husband. She underscored how her preaching has addressed various themes relevant to women, including the veil, the Hajj, ablution, cultural practices, and female circumcision (interview with Oumi, May 2012). Other female preachers consider Oumi their doyenne (elder) and see her as a role model because she persevered, despite being alone and without support at the start of her career, as a preacher.

The second stage of women’s Islamic activism in Burkina Faso began with the restructuring and modernization of the country’s madrasas (establishing grade levels, updating programmes and teaching materials). This development, which facilitated access to religious knowledge, was made possible by various forms of support from Arab-Islamic countries (for more details, see Cissé 2012), beginning at the end of the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s (Cissé 1990). Most of the female preachers who began hosting radio programmes
during the first decade of the twenty-first century had studied in modernized madrasas (in particular, at the Central Madrasa).

By contrast, Amina is an example of a woman who worked as a preacher during the same period but who was self-taught. She was a representative of the “August 4th” branch during the period when the Sankarist state set the improvement of women’s living conditions as one of its top priorities. She developed the habit of going to listen to the sermons at the Grand Mosque and taking notes in Mossi:

What attracted me was how they talked about how women lived, how children were raised … I realized that women had an important role. I noticed how, throughout the Qur’an, it was women who expressed the idea of knowledge, alongside the Prophet. (Interview with Amina, May 2013)

Becoming conscious of their central role in the destiny of their community, some women reinterpreted the sacred texts to support those who wished to speak publicly.

However, it was during a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1982 that she ultimately decided to embark on a career as a preacher:

On the Day of Arafat, I had a revelation: I was called to preach. I asked myself how I could preach without knowing the whole of the Qur’an. The women were gathered at Mecca and were chatting. I told myself that I could fill their time by reading from the Qur’an. From deep within, a voice told me to speak, speak … this is how I began to preach to women and in the presence of women. I continued to preach after my return, but only with people I had studied with, so they could correct me. I also preached in the villages. I gathered the women of Gounghin with the consent of the imam, in his house and later at the mosque. I taught what I knew. (Interview with Amina, 27 July 2009 and 10 June 2013)

After this, a personal religious experience made the sharing and transmission of knowledge a necessity. Amina “had the idea of creating an association where we could learn about religion together through reading the Qur’an” (interview with Amina, 27 July 2009). This process is reflected in the creation of the women’s section of the Al Itihad al Islami movement, which was officially recognized by the state on 16 August 1991. The creation of a separate association for women became imperative, reflecting a desire for a degree of independence from the already-existing men’s section of Al Itihad. The newly created women’s section was intended to be a special context for meetings where women of all ages and origins could share “ideas and experiences” (this was stated as the association’s primary objective), a space “open to all current of Islam (not just Tijānī).”

In practice, it was a matter of giving “(women) the opportunity to learn about religion,” of allowing them to “overcome ignorance” (interview with Amina, 27 July 2009 and 10 June 2013). This fits well with what Dorothea Schulz has observed. In particular, she has underscored how “Muslim women in Mali emphasize the public and collective significance of their daily practices” (Schulz 2008b, 84).

Furthermore, several interview respondents pointed out how “the women did not know anything, either about religion or Arabic … a large proportion of women had not attended school [and] with the creation of Al Itihad, it became clear that women did not understand their rights” (interview with Saskia, 23 March 2010). It is important to place this last statement – made by Saskia, a 40-year-old preacher who returned from Saudi Arabia to Burkina Faso in 1990 – in the context of ongoing debates surrounding the adoption of the Persons and Family Code (which took effect on 4 August 1990). The association therefore gave itself a second objective of “teaching women their rights and responsibilities with regard to religion and society” and a fourth objective of “providing women with the information on family life they need for maintaining good health and family planning.” (Letter to President of Burkina
Faso on 4 July 1994 in which the objectives of the association have been identified, National Archives of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou.) Reading between the lines, this was a call for women to become conscious of who they were and what they could gain by asserting more autonomy. It therefore went beyond a “moral renewal” (Schulz 2008a) to become more of a “personal enlightenment” (Schulz 2011, 114).

Educating women on the fundamental principles of religion (learning how to pray; memorizing the Qur’an in Arabic, with explanations provided in Mossi) was therefore considered urgent. This initial instruction could be followed up with commentaries on the Qur’an and the Sunna (words and deeds of the Prophet), in order to highlight what the sacred texts say on the status and role of women. For the founder of Al Itihad, bringing women together in mosque-based associations was a positive result of actions undertaken by the Mouvement Sunnite and proof that women were capable of organizing themselves. On the other hand, socioeconomic activities were organized “in order to support women through revenue-generating activities that gave them a degree of financial autonomy”12 although according to several interviews with members, these activities had very limited success (interviews conducted on 27 July 2009 and in July 2011). Islamic activism was therefore first and foremost a cultural and religious phenomenon. This is why, before officially creating the association, its founder felt the need to obtain the endorsement and support of Sheikh Doukouré, a leading male religious figure respected for his intellectual accomplishments (interview conducted on 27 July 2009).13

The need to transfer knowledge was at the centre of the association’s strategy and remains so to the present day. Reflecting on her own very different experience, the founder of Al Itihad explained how members of the younger generation, who have had the opportunity to study, teach other women how to preach. In this way, as a result of the transformation of educational institutions and the diversification and modernization of the madrasas, a new kind of woman had emerged, one who had pursued advanced studies in religion. Take, for example, the life story of Zara, one of the most prominent and tenacious preachers affiliated with Al Itihad. She has hosted programmes on the Al Houda radio station and given speeches to the women of the Mouvement Sunnite. And this is how she described the new context that better supported women’s educational ambitions, beginning in the 1980s:14

I attended the Samand in Madrasa from 1974 to 1977 and then the Central Madrasa from 1977 to 1982. I earned my Brevet [diploma awarded at the end of the first cycle of secondary studies] from the Aourema Institute in 1991 and then, in 2000, I earned my Arabic baccalaureate [awarded at the end of the second cycle of secondary studies] from the Central Madrasa. I began to preach at the age of 13, in 1980, to the women in my family. I repeated what I had learned in school about the life of the Prophet in front of the women and children every day after the evening meal. From members of my family, I moved on to neighbours. Then, I began to read the Qur’an to the men, to read the Sîra. In the beginning, I provided no commentary but I began to do so a year later. Also, at the opening of neighbourhood mosques and in the villages, I was invited to read short hadîths. After my Brevet in 1991, I received training from an association: Itihad al Islami. I was taught to preach by Sheikh Ali Cissé and Daouda Sawadogo15 and Aboubacar Sana.16 I met with them every Thursday at noon. The training has continued right up to the present day. It was a group of women of all ages studying for the Brevet who were learning public speaking, to read the Sîra, and to comment on them. They learned about the rights of women and children. (Interview with Zara, 25 July 2009)

The third stage of women’s Islamic activism began in the 1990s, when a certain number of female preachers returned from studies abroad, where they had been perfecting their knowledge of Islam. These women also became integrated into an international network that
encompassed both Islamic organizations that financed educational initiatives – such as the World Islamic Call Society – and Western Islamic organizations that ensured greater visibility for efforts to promote women’s rights – such as the Population and Development Network funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Even if their visits abroad were often cut short because they returned to Burkina Faso to get married, these women’s encounters with other educational systems and other experiences of faith caused them to more clearly acknowledge the need for changes in the behaviour of their coreligionists. This heightened awareness also led individual female preachers to become more deeply involved in Islamic activism. The life story of one of these preachers, Saskia, known for her vigorous defence of women’s rights, shed light on these new circumstances:

After studying with Doukouré, in 1983, I left to continue my studies in Saudi Arabia. Upon my arrival in Saudi Arabia, I received a scholarship to study in Medina, where I received my Brevet in 1987 as well as a baccalaureate. I started to preach at the age of 20. In 1990, I returned to Burkina Faso to complete a master’s degree at Sheikh Doukouré’s establishment. I was part of the first class in theology. When I returned from Saudi Arabia, I noticed that Islam is not properly understood in Burkina Faso, that the children are not properly educated. Girls get married early, after they get their Preparatory Certificate [awarded at the end of primary school]. This state of affairs drove me to get out into the field. This is why, in 2000, I opened a school for needy, vulnerable and orphaned children of different religions in Seguedin [60 km from Ouagadougou]. I ventured into people’s yards to raise parents’ awareness. Before, these children did not attend school. I wanted to create a bilingual school. The World Islamic Call Society built me a mosque and two classrooms after their visit two years ago. I was one of the founders of Al Itihad al Islami in 1991 and I am its vice president. I was responsible for women’s affairs in the network of Islamic organizations working on population and development. It was Hassan Cissé from Dakar who took the initiative to create this network and he invited us to Abuja in 2005 to discuss several themes, including female circumcision, early marriage, HIV, etc. He insisted that women be present. After this meeting, the network established an office in Burkina Faso. A national tour was organized in 2009, funded by the UNFPA. (Interview with Saskia, 23 March 2010)

The fourth stage of women’s Islamic activism is illustrated by two developments that occurred at the turn of the twenty-first century: first, the presence of female preachers on the airwaves, thanks to the creation of two private Islamic radio stations (Al Houda and Ridwâne in Ouagadougou) and to a private television station (Al Houda); and, second, the diversification of opportunities for Islamic education in Burkina Faso. Even though, in Burkina Faso, men retained a quasi-monopoly over public discussions of religion, especially in the case of a small number of media personalities, a few women also succeeded in entering the fray. For Al Itihad al Islami, access to the airwaves was an opportunity for women to widely spread their own message regarding the status of women, when only men had addressed the subject before. It also raised the possibility of having the audience benefit from female religious knowledge using a very popular medium. In this context, the association served as a springboard, allowing female preachers to gain exposure on the airwaves. As a result, a new breed of woman – in her thirties, highly educated, and capable of communicating via the media – entered a space that had previously been reserved for men.

At the outset, representatives of both radio stations approached certain women who were members of Al Itihad. The fact that the Ridwâne radio station took this initiative is not surprising, insofar as the station belonged to Sheikh Doukouré. Furthermore, the person responsible for religious programming, including the choice of hosts, was none other than one of Sheikh Doukouré’s doctoral students. During the final visit in May 2013, new female preachers had begun to broadcast. They were about 20 years old, supporters or even members of the Mouvement Sunnite who were continuing their studies. Aya is a case in point:
I began my education at the Zayd ben Sabit Franco-Arabic School in Nonsin, where I remained until the end of primary school. Then, I earned my baccalaureate at the Ibn Taymiyya Madrasa. After that, I began studying at Al Houda University until my second year, with a major in sharia and Islamic law. For five years, I have been a member of the Association des jeunes musulmans pour un développement solidaire, which is affiliated with the Mouvement Sunnite. On the Ridwan radio station, I host an interactive programme on women, family, and society. I have already hosted one programme on forced marriage and I plan to host one on female circumcision. In the Muslim religion, a lot of people provide information that is not correct – but an individual with knowledge can take control of their home, their personality. (Interview with Aya, May 2013)

The Al Houda radio station, affiliated with the Mouvement Sunnite, tried to recruit new on-air personalities by contacting members of Al Itihad. This signalled the start of an internal “revolution.” In 2004, in an effort to ease tensions within the Mouvement Sunnite, Dr Kindo had called for an end to the isolation of women; for the ability of women to organize themselves by creating their own committee; and for opportunities for women to pursue activities outside of the home, including educational activities, so they could pass down knowledge from mother to child, preach, and do paid work. It was in this context that, with the help of Dr Kindo, three women were asked in 2004 to host programmes on the Al Houda radio station on the themes of raising children’s and women’s rights and responsibilities (interview with Amina, July 2011). All three women were active in Al Itihad, which had become an incubator for female Islamic figures who, regardless of outlook or origins, sought to expand their Islamic activism. According to one administrator of the Al Houda radio station, “two [of the three women] have extensive knowledge but one of them is there just because I want to encourage her.” He went on to observe that “women have not had extensive education and can stray, make statements without foundation. It is therefore necessary to supervise them” (interview conducted on 16 July 2009). Overall, these developments point to a process of internal change underway within the Mouvement Sunnite that remains to be confirmed more broadly.

This is why the life story of Ami, a member of the Mouvement Sunnite, remains exceptional:

At the age of eight, I enrolled at the Ahl Souna Franco-Arabic School in Ouidi, which is affiliated with the Mouvement Sunnite. I left that institution to complete primary school at a madrasa affiliated with the CMBF in Goughin. I failed my exam, so I retook the class and received my Primary Studies Certificate. Then, I attended the CMBF’s Central Madrasa beginning in the sixth year and eventually received my Brevet. Since there were no higher levels of study available to me at the time, I got married. In 1998, I went to the Doukoure institute to take courses toward my baccalaureate. Also, on Thursdays, I took courses in preaching at the Mahad Al cilm institute. I received my baccalaureate in 2001. After Doukoure University opened in 2005, I completed a master’s degree in Islamic Studies in 2009. That same year, as part of an initiative launched by Al Itihad, my sisters [in Islam] and I taught other women in the neighbourhoods. That year, the theme was registering girls for school. (Interview with Amina, 25 July 2009)

Ami was not educated in institutions managed by the Mouvement Sunnite, as the organization had only recently begun to encourage the education of girls. The emergence of a generation of women formally educated in Islamic subjects was still to come. Furthermore, the fact that specific female preachers do not seem to have been assigned to individual radio programmes, or that the programmes have been broadcast irregularly – depending on both the availability of a host and the host’s ability to pay for travel (any travel subsidies are very modest) – has caused significant turnover and left the door open to other women (in their early thirties), including both Mouvement Sunnite activists and others. Those not affiliated with the Mouvement Sunnite have tended to be women who were required to stop attending
school at a young age for family reasons without having resumed their formal education. They have also been active in the Islamic education of women in the neighbourhoods. Take, for example, the case of Sana:

I have been a member of the Mouvement Sunnite for 20 years. I wanted to join the association and by marrying one of its members I was able to do so. I like to wear the veil and dress in black, which is why I like the Mouvement Sunnite. I completed the final year of primary school in Ouagadougou, although I was unable to obtain a certificate because I did not have enough money. *After my marriage*, I was taught by a woman in my neighbourhood who was also a member of the Mouvement Sunnite. My training lasted two years and I was able to memorize the entire Qur’an. *For the last 18 years*, I have taught women the Qur’an, Tawhid, the hadîths, the invocations, and the life of the Prophet. I began to host programmes on the radio on 2 July 2010 and on the Al Houda television station on 19 July 2012. Sometimes I travel to the radio or television station with children from my school to read from the Qur’an or the hadîths. *For the time being, I do not have a programme with invited guests but that is in the works. The management of the radio and television stations have asked me to adopt that format. I opened the school on my own initiative.* (Interview conducted in May 2013)

All of these pioneering women had a profound impact on Islamic movements in Burkina Faso and their life stories illustrate the extent to which women’s Islamic activism has undergone perpetual renewal. Among the four stages of women’s Islamic activism, the beginning of the 1990s represents a key turning point; through the initiative of Al Itihad, a network of women was established and new educational opportunities for women emerged. The 1990s only reinforced these gains, allowing women to openly discuss an increasingly large array of subjects related to their status. The creation of private Islamic radio stations at the turn of the twenty-first century gave female preachers the opportunity to raise these issues in front of a larger audience – and while the existing scholarship focuses on how the presence of religion in the media has favoured the development of a more homogeneous religious discourse (Gomez-Perez and Madore 2013; Holder and Saint-Lary 2013; Savadogo and Gomez-Perez 2011), the activities of these female preachers tend to paint a more nuanced portrait.

II A new way of “being a good Muslim”?

In the midst of both a revival of Islamic activism focused on da’wa (religious proselytizing technique) and the emergence of a new model of believer defined by unwavering faith, female preachers set out to teach women about their religious obligations and how to fulfil them according to the principles “of Islamic piety and virtuous behaviour” (Mahmood 2005, 15). These lessons took the form of injunctions. The discourses adopted by the preachers I met were therefore focused on the benefits of being a “good Muslim.” This meant having unwavering faith, practising Islam on a daily basis, praying and knowing how to pray, behaving on a daily basis according to the precepts of the Qur’an and the Sunna, following the path of the Prophet, being well guided, and living an irreproachable and exemplary life full of piety (Marshall-Fratani and Péclard 2002). To reinforce their message, female preachers from a variety of Islamic movements turned to different role models from the time of the Prophet: Khadija, known as “the saint,” revered for her devotion and for being the first to accept and believe in the revealed message; Aïcha, one of the Prophet’s wives, who epitomized the educated women from whom the Prophet’s companions sought advice (interview with Tania, March 2010). In this way, the discourses adopted by these female figures were
the “product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they [were] located” (Mahmood 2005, 32). Female listeners were exhorted to follow these ideal examples of good Muslim womanhood and identify with them (the same process has been observed within the Sufi brotherhoods, see Mbow 1997; Rosander 1997). Their behaviour was presented as an example to be followed by all women. By not alluding to any figures of female piety from West Africa, focusing instead on a glorified golden age of Islam, the rhetoric was decidedly traditional.

Furthermore, most of the radio programmes discussed life stages and milestones (marriage, domestic life, raising children), as well as the traditional role of women in the private sphere (the good wife, the good mother; on similarities with the situation in Côte d’Ivoire, see LeBlanc 2007). The hosts recommended that women “respect their husbands and avoid allowing anyone to enter their yard without the permission of their husband … to know how to raise their children so that they would be able to find work” (interview with Amina, 10 June 2013); in short, women remained primarily responsible for family harmony and raising children. The discourse also emphasized a traditional model of the family where the separate roles of men and women were clearly defined: the man remained the head of the household and the wife stayed at her husband’s side, ensuring harmony in the relationship and the family. Taken together, these arguments served to help consolidate prevailing social and moral norms (Saint-Lary 2011).

Since the 1980s, the active participation of women in religious activities such as preaching, debates, public lectures, Arabic literacy classes, etc. has allowed female preachers to move beyond the traditional rhetoric described above. Thus, they have progressively begun to express themselves on a variety of subjects, including gender relations, the spacing of births, female circumcision, and forced marriage.

For example, female preachers of all types have counselled men to be exemplary husbands so they can live in harmony with their wives, for the good of the family, to listen to their wives, seek their counsel, and make decisions together. Husbands must be gentle, calm, accessible, easy to understand, generous, fair and attentive to their families, loving and attentive to their wives, open, courageous, inclined to give presents to their wives, reluctant to reprimand them, capable of admitting their own mistakes in front of their wives, and reluctant to find fault with them: quoting Khadi on Ridwâne FM, 11 March 2011, “if the food is good, he eats; however, if this is not the case, he does not eat and never flinches.”

This long list of duties might seem amusing because of the portrait it paints of the ideal husband. However, it is important to recognize that the list also reflects the opposite of what many women were experiencing in the home, something that became clear through listening to discussions between women and to the experiences described during neighbourhood preaching activities, as well as through documenting the personal real-life experiences of the preachers themselves. By shedding light on the day-to-day realities experienced by some women, these preachers sought to raise awareness in all their listeners (in the knowledge that their audience was growing and that they reached women and men of all ages). In this way, preachers called on both men and women to rethink social norms in order to reduce tensions within families and between spouses; to make other men and women more conscious of their duties and their rights through references to the sacred texts; and, more broadly, to cause gender relations to evolve. As Ami, a member of the Mouvement Sunnite and Al Itihad, very clearly stated,
women talk about how men must take care of their wives – but men talk about the submission of women. Yet Islam has defined both rights and responsibilities. Islam gives many rights to women. A lot of practices are already defined, explained in the hadîths. … Islam has already established its own form of family planning. You cannot say that it is forbidden. Islam calls for 30 months and two full years of breastfeeding. Islam accepts family planning but not birth control. (Interview with Ami, 5 July 2009)

This outlook reflects the implementation of a two-part strategy. First, sacred texts were reinterpreted by setting aside interpretations seen as patriarchal. For example, during an interview with Oumi, who had been the first Muslim to begin preaching in the 1970s, she explained her views on female circumcision:

I looked in books and I consulted Sheikh Doukouré for his view. By looking at the religion, you know that female circumcision is not required, is not healthy for women. Religion wants us to be in good health and it should improve our lives. I am opposed to forced marriage most of all. Many Muslims believe, wrongly, that forced marriage is Islamic. A woman must give her consent beforehand. You should marry the woman or the man that you want. There must be love within the couple. (Interview with Oumi, May 2013)

The autonomy of judgement shown by Oumi is only partial, not full and complete. Her explanation reflects both a dependence on Doukouré's religious authority and a need to display a certain degree of modesty, a quality often celebrated within Islamic movements that appeal to “religious humbleness” (LeBlanc 2007, 43; see also, LeBlanc 2014; on how the same process has occurred in Mali, see Schulz 2008c, 9). At the same time, she makes extensive use of a very common argument among Islamic activists: the religious message confers a blessing on all those who hear it, regardless of gender. She nevertheless stresses a woman's freedom to choose, especially in questions related to marriage. It is therefore a matter of “positive freedom … understood as the capacity to realise an autonomous will … and hence unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition” (Mahmood 2005, 11). In the same vein, Saskia – an influential member of Al Itihad responsible for overseeing women's affairs within the network of Islamic organizations working on population and development – shared her views on marriage: “Islam allows you to divorce. Women do not know this and they suffer as a result. Today, men have misunderstood polygamy, they have forgotten the conditions” (interview with Saskia, 23 March 2010). Her words clearly reflect a phenomenon that Rosa de Jorio has described in the following terms: “Women problematized male-centred readings of Islam” (De Jorio 2009, 103).

The second part of the strategy involved subtly questioning social norms, advice, and related suggestions. In doing so, female preachers sought to highlight complementarity between the sexes, as well as the mutual rights and responsibilities of spouses. This reflects a desire to avoid any direct confrontations with male power and to focus on the shared responsibilities of men and women (on how the same process has been observed in Mali, see De Jorio 2009, 105) – for, as Béatrice Bertho has quite rightly underscored, “women could not openly challenge gender and generational norms – social norms which, in particular, defined obedience as an attribute of the ‘good wife’” (Bertho 2012, 113). In this way, female preachers also subtly revealed their capacity for reacting (or even taking initiative) in the face of the difficult (and sometimes coercive) social realities faced by women.29

However, some female preachers have gone even further in questioning social norms. For example, the mere act of calling for decisions to be jointly made by both spouses has to be considered “somewhat” revolutionary in a Mossi society where the husband must, according to prevailing norms, be responsible for household expenses (Attané 2009), where
Burkinabe women rarely act as heads of household (Pilon and Vignikin 2006), and where “an individual's free will in the choice of a spouse is limited for men and nonexistent for women” (Ilboudo 2006, 78). Within the Mouvement Sunnite, such demands are also a reflection of the internal changes encouraged by Kindo, as discussed above.

Furthermore, the recent introduction of interactive programming, especially on the Ridwâne radio station, shows that female preachers have been enjoying a little freedom of speech in public. Aya, a supporter of the Mouvement Sunnite, has hosted one such programme:

During my programme on forced marriage, I explained that it was not a good thing. In the time of the Prophet, the practice was not encouraged. During my last programme, I told the true story of a couple. The wife became pregnant and the husband wanted her to get an abortion but the wife refused. After the listeners had their say, I drew the conclusion: a woman may take medicine to space out births but without dictating the number of births. According to Islam, there must be two years between children – therefore no limit on the number of births, just the spacing. (Interview with Aya, May 2013)

In order to give more validity to all of these arguments, female preachers refer to the Prophet and his companions (stated by Khadi on Ridwâne FM, 24 June 2011). The Prophet is variously described as a “man close to his family, a close friend to his children, attentive to his wives, ready to help with household chores, capable of bringing joy to his family and peace to his home” (interview with Khadi, 6 March 2011). He is said to “have never restricted women's access to education” to the extent that he gave them “the freedom to participate in public life,” which allowed for “learned women to establish themselves” (stated by Saskia on Ridwâne FM, 25 February 2011). These references to the Prophet's actions and activities (the Sunna) show the extent to which female preachers' advanced religious training has given them “the feeling that they [have] just as much authority as … others to invoke Islamic tradition” (Mahmood 2005, 105).

Aïcha, another preacher, also referred to the words of Umar (2nd caliph), who described the following real-life situation:

One day, a man and his wife left to visit Umar. Given the poor state of her husband's clothing, she neglected to introduce him – but once she had told her husband to clean himself and cut his hair, upon his return the wife was very happy and declared to anyone who wished to listen that he was her husband. (Interview with Aïcha, 11 March 2011)

This example implies three things: first, that the woman held informed opinions and was following the precepts of Islam; second, that the woman's opinion was important and validated by Umar's approval of her reminding her husband of his duties. The woman was therefore portrayed as the one who had assimilated the religious message and applied it as a guardian of the faith. She was more than just the property of her husband. Finally, more so than the compatibility of spouses, the principle of a husband who was respectful of social and religious norms, as well as his marital responsibilities, corrected any imbalance in marital relations, including cases where the husband is in a situation of inferiority. This was considered the key to a successful marriage. A reference to Umar was also used in discussing forced marriage: “Umar always said that the practice of forced marriage must be avoided because girls admired men and preferred to make their own choices” (stated by Khadi on Ridwâne FM, 11 March 2011). The challenge was to introduce “new ideas about female identity [that] challenge ideas about male identity (which have also changed)” (Sow 2003, 72).
All of these examples have been used to support a process of recodification and to make the Islamic education of women appear necessary, if not imperative. Saskia went furthest in probing the usefulness of educational initiatives by raising the broader question of women’s role in society. First of all, she offered a traditional normative argument, according to which an educated woman is better able to educate her children and manage her household; her role was thus one of transmission. Next, she defended the idea that the educated woman is the man’s partner in action, clearly referring to the complementarity of gender roles and identifying women as key social actors. This second argument was reinforced by the idea that educated women represent an essential link for engagement in the process of development. For this to be achieved, it was recommended that the (“good Muslim”) father allow his daughters to pursue their studies over a long period. The allegory of a plane needing two wings to fly was often used to illustrate the necessity of cohesion between men and women in their actions. Finally, Saskia argued that Islamic teaching must not only serve to make women good practising Muslims but also to make them conscious of their rights. Thus, Islamic teaching plays a pivotal role in revisiting patriarchal interpretations of the sacred texts of Islam, while making women aware of the rights that are guaranteed to them under Islamic law. She ultimately made a call for gender equality: “Women are equal to men, but if they do not know it, they will never be able to discover their true roles” (interview with Saskia, 23 March 2010). This argument sets Saskia apart from most of the other Arabic-educated women I met, since she goes beyond the model established by traditional da’wa.

Between the two types of discourses analysed above, there exists a middle ground. Some female preachers seek to make their mark by offering interpretations of social practices prescribed by law. For example, on the subject of female circumcision, Aya, a supporter of the Mouvement Sunnite and the host of an interactive programme on the Ridwân radio station, stated:

> according to my knowledge, the problem is not whether circumcision takes place or not. It is the way that circumcision is done that is the problem. The Prophet stated that circumcision should not be complete. In the case of my own daughters, I will not have them circumcised. If my husband wants to have his daughter circumcised, I will report him to the police. (Interview with Aya, May 2013)

She seems to betray a certain ambiguity by oscillating between a normative position and one more aligned with women’s rights. However, even if the culminating argument can be dismissed as an act of bravado, it nevertheless reflects Aya’s desire to establish herself as an autonomous being, informed about existing legislation (femal genital mutilation is forbidden) and conscious of the societal issues behind the act.

In the same vein, Binta – another young female preacher on the Al Houda radio station who was not active in any Islamic associations when I met her in August 2011 – maintained an ambiguous discourse on the logic behind marital relations. Even if, for her, the rights and responsibilities of spouses are clearly established – “the wife has the right to her husband’s protection, he must care for her if she falls ill, provide food; the wife must educate herself, for knowledge makes it possible to resolve family problems” (interview with Binta, 2 August 2011) – her subsequent arguments create some confusion:

> I don’t think that family planning is prohibited, but according to my own personal experience, if you don’t adopt it you will suffer. It is important to follow the advice of the midwives on contraception. You can manage it on your own if your husband refuses to come along. Otherwise, you can go together. Financial autonomy is very good. The man is in charge of the household
but consultation can take place. If the man accepts, professionally, the woman and the man can do the same work. (Interview with Binta, 2 August 2011)

Thus, Binta wavers between giving pre-eminence to three different priorities: the health of the woman, the husband’s opinion, and the wife’s right to make decisions under certain circumstances.

All of the discourses analysed above shed light on the winding road to recodification of social norms, the destination being the “site of women’s capacity for action” (Mahmood 2005, 18). Ultimately, this recodification emerges as a space of possibilities where women not only undertake a moral reading of norms, but also invoke those norms in order to re-examine them in the domestic and public spheres, with the aim of better defining the place and the role of women in society.

III Conclusion

Though it was the creation of two Islamic radio stations during the first decade of the twenty-first century which allowed some Arabic-educated women to take to the airwaves, the origins of women’s Islamic activism in Burkina Faso stretch back to the 1970s. The life story of the doyenne of contemporary female preachers highlights the importance given to acquiring religious knowledge, as well as its local, national and international ramifications. As reflected in their individual experiences up to the present day, female preachers have had to show a significant degree of flexibility in order to acquire and share this knowledge.

During the 1980s, various female figures had a profound impact on the religious landscape, leading to the creation of the women’s section of Al Itihad al Islami movement at the beginning of the 1990s. Developments during the 1990s served to reinforce these established trends. Indeed, it was during these two decades that Arabic-educated women intensely pursued their activities in neighbourhood associations and rural villages, seeking to enlighten women of different milieus and generations. They focused their efforts on teaching not only cultural practices but also the sacred texts, with the goal of better defining the status and the role of women within Islam.

By studying the lives and careers of individual women, and by listening to what they had to say during interviews and radio programmes, it has been possible to show “the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated” (Mahmood 2005, 23). I have tried not simply to put forward a “dualistic framework … in which norms are conceptualized on the model of doing and undoing, consolidation and subversion” (Mahmood 2005, 23), but also to show how certain women have staked out intermediate positions in order to explore the range of possibilities in terms of lifestyles and interacting with social norms. In this way, beyond a somewhat conformist reading of the sacred texts, extracts from interviews with and the radio programmes of a number of female preachers reveal how some of them are subtly inviting listeners to question certain societal norms related to gender relations by proposing an alternative reading. These preachers called for a better balance between the roles of men and women, and for women’s viewpoints and opinions to be taken into consideration, especially in marriage and domestic life. As they teach women their duties as wives and mothers, they also highlight women’s rights. This inevitably depends on making women aware of two key points: first, that they have historically actively contributed to the spread of Islam, doing so with men’s approval; and, second, that they needed to educate themselves in order to gain autonomy and become
guides for other women. In this way, these female preachers are calling on both men and women to assume their responsibilities and claim their rightful places within society.

Notes

1. In 1987, Doukouré became a permanent member of the Academy of Jurisprudence of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) as well as Councillor for Islamic Affairs for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Burkina Faso. After serving as the Vice President of the Executive Council of Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) in 1992, he chaired the organization's Board of Directors.

2. The interviews were conducted in July 2009, March 2010 and May 2013.

3. Take, for example, the growing interest in Arabic night classes, Qur’anic reading groups, and discussions on specific questions held in prayer rooms reserved for women. Regardless of their age, women have become increasingly inclined to participate in these sorts of activities.

4. The same process has been observed in Senegal (Gomez-Perez and Ba 2015).

5. The same phenomenon has been observed in Senegal (Gomez-Perez and Ba 2015).

6. All of the first names used in this article are pseudonyms.

7. On how the same process has been observed in Mali, see Schulz (2006, 2011).

8. To understand the discrepancy between official policies and their implementation on the ground, and to better understand how the Conseil national de la révolution struggled in the face of social resistance, see Benabdessadok (1985, 60–62) and Ilboudo (2006).

9. A female preacher who was well known in the Islamic community was the only member of the Mouvement Sunnite who was also a member of Al Itihad.

10. Saskia’s life story is described in more detail below when I present the third stage of women’s Islamic activism.

11. Ilboudo has underscored how, in the development of the Code, the “search for equality [gender equality and equality between children] seems to have been a major concern. … The choice of a written law implied … its application to all the rules of the Civil Code and, in particular, free consent to marriage, monogamy and divorce, following the conditions imposed by the Civil Code. But above all, the new marriage law was most favourable to women, by eliminating previous inequalities. … in particular, by prohibiting forced marriages and levirate marriages” (Ilboudo 2006, 78–79, 86–87, 90).

12. For example, the opening of a Shea butter production facility and a sewing workshop.

13. Indeed, Sheikh Doukouré was part of the first group of students to leave for the Arab countries. He was the first to receive a doctorate in Islamic Law from the University of Medina. Furthermore, since 1992, he has been the permanent delegate of the OIC. He has also chaired the executive committee of ISESCO since 2006.

14. Only since around 2006 has a balance been struck between the number of hours set aside for teaching in Arabic and French. According to the managers of the madrasa, who were interviewed in March 2010, the goal is to achieve this balance for the cycle of secondary studies that was created in 1979.

15. They are both imams affiliated with the Al Itihad movement.

16. An imam affiliated with the CMBF. He is one of the most visible figures in the public sphere; his sermons reach a large audience.

17. Sara, Sauda and Kali, out of a total of some 20 preachers who were interviewed.

18. In Burkina Faso, the network encompasses 14 associations, including the CMBF, the Mouvement Sunnite, Al Itihad, and l’Association islamique de la Tidjaniyya du Burkina.

19. Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, associations of women educated in French have also shown a clear interest in questions related to gender and marital relationships in some of their publications and activities.

20. By contrast, there is a very broad choice of media in Senegal, including numerous commercial radio (Dunya FM, radio Sud FM, RFM) and television (RDV and Islam TV) stations. The Al Houda television station is still in its infancy, which is why it is not discussed in this article. However,
it is important to note the existence of a debate on whether it is religiously acceptable for
women to appear on-screen, wearing black and completely covered.

21. For example, Ismael Derra, Alidou Ilboudo, Ismael Tiemdrebeogo and Tiégo Tiemtoré.
22. For example, at the Ridwâne radio station, female preachers are required to have a licence
(university degree) to host a programme. Furthermore radio station managers often point out
that preaching and hosting a religious radio programme are two very different things, both in
terms of form and content. After all, in the media, there are limits to what can be said. Hosts
need to maintain an appropriate tone, free of vindictiveness towards other religious groups,
in order to avoid breaking the rules established by the Conseil supérieur de la communication.
23. While studying in Saudi Arabia, Mohamed Kindo made contacts within the Mouvement Sunnite
and began to pursue conciliatory measures. He completed his studies in Medina in 2003,
receiving a doctorate in religion (with a specialization in dogma). He joined the association
in 2004, later becoming the Coordinator of the Council of Elders and the Grand Imam of the
Mouvement Sunnite.
24. The profession of medical doctor was often used as an example; if men allowed their wives
and daughters to study medicine then female doctors would be available to examine girls
and women.
25. This same discourse also appeared in other West African countries.
26. The same discourse could be found in the publications of the Association des élèves et étudiants
musulmans du Burkina Faso (founded in 1985) and the Cercle d’études de recherches et de
formation Islamiques (CERFI, founded in 1989). Most French-speaking activists were involved
in these two associations.
27. Neighbourhood-based women’s associations would invite well-known speakers to give
addresses on subjects related to women’s day-to-day living conditions.
28. I was able to witness this phenomenon during interactive broadcasts hosted by young female
preachers on the Ridwâne radio station in May 2010.
29. Béatrice Bertho has identified several authors who discuss this capacity for action on the part
of women – including cases of forced marriages and changes to the father’s role with regard
to the children – as a way of undermining a structural-functionalist reading of the family in
Africa (Bertho 2012, 100).

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