

# Peace in the Land of Upright People: Religion and Violence in Burkina Faso

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## **Abstract**

Despite its desperate poverty and geographical position in a region wrought with religious and political violence, Burkina Faso has avoided displays of religious intolerance. Instead, it has upheld a reputation as an extremely open, welcoming and tolerant society, which has been maintained despite a lack of religious homogeneity in the country. This article attempts to explain how Burkina Faso has remained regionally unique in its approach towards religion by studying the country's social, cultural/ethnic, and religious climate, as well as the present socio-religious interrelations within the family and community setting. After looking at several hypotheses, some unique factors seem determinant, including the geographical diversity of ethnic and religious groups across Burkina Faso, leading to a high contact setting between groups of various beliefs and ethnicities. This diversity, combined with the interdependent lifestyle lived by the majority of Burkina Faso's citizens, has led to a peace-fostering emphasis on community harmony over doctrinal certainty.

**Keywords:** West Africa, Colonization, Burkina Faso, Religious Conflict, Religious Violence, Thomas Sankara, Blaise Compaoré, Mossi, Fulbe

In West Africa, religious violence has disrupted public harmony and political functioning intermittently over the last thirty years. This violence has varied in scale from localized terrorist attacks to coup d'états and forced implementation of harsh religious law on unwilling populations. Despite

creating the perception of a region wrought with political instability and religious conflict, religious violence has not reached all countries in West Africa. This article will focus on Burkina Faso, a country that has avoided religious violence and maintained social harmony despite its desperate poverty, lack of stable democratic leadership, diverse religious population and close geographic proximity to countries with various levels of religious-based violence. Though Burkina Faso is placed near the bottom of many development indicators (including the Human Development Index, where Burkina Faso is ranked 183 out of 187 countries), its people have maintained a social harmony marked by religious tolerance. This article will explore why Burkina Faso remains comparatively peaceful and tolerant for its region, with a noticeable absence of religious-based violence and discrimination<sup>1</sup>. Many possible theories could explain Burkina Faso's atypical condition, and indeed many different factors come together to contribute to its peaceful state. These various factors will be closely examined, and an argument will be made that the communal-based living structures, the lack of any ethno-religious alliances, and the geographic dispersion of groups combine to create the present state of peace in the Land of Upright People.

## **Conflict vs. Violence**

For this article's purposes, 'violence' will be defined separately from 'conflict'. The significance of this difference is outlined by Rogers Brubaker and David D. in their article 'Ethnic and Nationalist Violence':

It is important, that is, to ask specific questions about, and seek specific explanations for, the occurrence-and non-occurrence ... of violence in conflictual situations. These questions and explanations should be distinguished from questions and explanations of the existence, and even the intensity, of conflict. We lack strong

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<sup>1</sup> While this article focuses on religious-based violence, it is not meant to extend its claims to ethnic or tribal-based conflict, which is renowned in West Africa and also exists in Burkina Faso. This article claims that while such ethnic tensions have complimented or exacerbated the rise of religious violence in neighbouring West African countries, such a tumultuous relationship is not likely to be made in Burkina Faso.

evidence showing that higher levels of conflict (measured independently of violence) lead to higher levels of violence (Brubaker & David 1998: 426).

The concept of conflict must therefore be separated from violence. Ethnic-based *conflict* is present today in many West-African countries, including Burkina Faso, but the escalation to *violence* between distinct groups rarely occurs in Burkina Faso. For the scope of this paper, violence will be defined as nation-wide political and social disorder, dissolution of effective law-enforcement, and ‘direct use of force to cause bodily harm’ on a widespread scale, either enacted by citizens or through military action (Brubaker & David 1998: 427). Conflict will be defined as long-standing tension or competition between locally-defined groups, potentially resulting in small-scale violent acts (usually as a result of a specific disturbance) as opposed to wide-spread acts of hate or discrimination perennially directed against a group. The level of collective identity development can also serve as a point of differentiation between conflict and violence. In his work on collective identity construction and violent collective action, Stanley Tambiah coins the terms ‘focalization’ and ‘transvaluation’ to describe the process of an action spreading from its localized origins into a wide-spread or national dispute (Tambiah 1996). In this process, a conflict or series of conflicts serve to unite distinct, local groups, forming them into a coalition tied together through mutual interest or shared animosity toward another group, thereby expanding the conflict from the local level into a wider-ranging quarrel. These terms will be applied here to describe the process of conflict transforming into violence in the West African context.

The shift from conflict to violence has been evaluated within the West African context before, and this dichotomy has offered a better understanding of why some conflicts escalate to widespread violence within this region, while most remain contained and resolved at the local level. Mark Mortiz organized five points of differentiation between conflict and violence in his work on conflict escalation, specifically focused on the herder/farmer conflict in West Africa:

Pruitt and Kim (2004:89-91) discuss five general transformations that occur during conflict escalation: (1) shift from small to large (i.e., increasing investment in the conflict); (2) shift from light to heavy

tactics (e.g., from persuasion to violence); (3) shift from specific to general (e.g., from crop damage to ethnic conflict); (4) shift from few to many (i.e., increase in the number of people involved in the conflict); and (5) shifts in goals from doing well to winning to hurting the other party (e.g., from solving the problem to killing all opponents (Moritz 2010: 142).

These steps indicate, for our purposes, the shifting scale from conflict to violence. This article will argue that while Burkina Faso may experience similar levels of conflict compared to other West African countries, it has not historically escalated toward the violence that Pruitt and Kim originally outlined. There are not any obvious reasons why Burkina Faso has avoided these shifts. Therefore, each potential explanation will be explored and evaluated in turn before suggesting a most likely explanation.

## **Hypotheses**

### **1. The political history of Burkina Faso has led to a tolerant society**

This hypothesis states that the political leadership of the country is the determining factor in containing religious violence. This argument claims that political leaders largely determine the social relations and culture within a country. To accept this explanation in the case of Burkina Faso would be to assume its political history is unique from that of its neighboring West African countries and its leaders have made a conscious attempt to instill religious tolerance in the citizenship more so than its neighboring countries<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Such leadership qualities could theoretically be found in any form of government (oligarchic, autocratic, etc.) though a more democratic government would arguably have greater interest in maintaining harmony amongst all ethnic/religious groups without elevating one group to dominance, as the government is held accountable to all groups. In addition, a democracy as defined by regular elections and an active, universal electorate would arguably provide outlets for citizens to demand equal recognition of rights/benefits within the society. In contrast, a dictatorship or nepotistic government would have less incentive to value all groups equally, and more

A close reading of Burkina Faso's political history, as well as a brief overview of its neighboring countries' political histories is necessary to dissect the potential validity of this argument.

Political leadership in West Africa is largely characterized by corruption, dictatorial power-grabbing and great financial inequality between the ruling class and the general population<sup>3</sup>. The previously-considered 'democratic beacon' for the region, Mali, fell into political disarray and military violence following a coup d'état in 2012. That same year, Liberia's former president, Charles Taylor, was convicted of human rights abuses in neighboring Sierra Leone. Côte d'Ivoire is still recovering from a bloody, 10-year on-and-off civil war stemming from political division and election controversy. While Burkina Faso is not currently facing civil war, its political situation is precarious and has included many of the same political instabilities of neighboring countries, including coup d'états, long-term one-party rule, and government rule through military enforcement. Its former president, Blaise Compaoré, held power under the guise of questionable democratic elections for over 25 years before resigning amid widespread public protest in 2014. While Compaoré can be credited with keeping domestic peace (until the waves of public protest that ended his own presidency), he did little to improve Burkina Faso's world economic standing, even keeping the country in the bottom 10 countries in the world on the Human Poverty Index for 10 years straight (United Nations development Programme 2013). But despite these economic and democratic shortcomings, the question remains as to whether Burkina's unique position as a haven of tolerance and personal respect across religious lines is a result of its political leadership. In one sense, the stubborn stability of the Compaoré regime could be seen as providing a sense of social security for the past quarter-century; a condition not to be taken lightly in a region where regime change can mean

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leeway to elevate his/her own social/religious group. For more on self-governance leading to dignity within the democratic model, see Ober (2012: 827-846).

<sup>3</sup> This can largely describe the governments of Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Niger, and recently Mali. Of course some exceptions do exist, such as in Ghana and Senegal. But the praise these countries receive for their successes in maintaining democratic rule show that they are the exceptions that prove the rule.

catastrophe. Compaoré did not stir up religious favoritism or discrimination within his country (details of which will follow below) but the lack of provocation does not mean that Compaoré took any actions to quell religious conflict, nor that such conflict was simmering beneath the surface in the first place.

If Compaoré's tenure is unremarkable within the collection of quarter-century West African presidents, his ascension to the position was no unique path, either. Compaoré assumed his position as president in 1987 after a coup d'état which resulted in the murder of then-president Thomas Sankara, to whom Compaoré was a close advisor and friend. Compaoré's violent ascension to the presidency and over 25-year term as president aligned him closely to the political history of neighboring countries. If the key to Burkina's unique social culture could be explained by its political history, then, the tenure of Compaoré's predecessor Thomas Sankara would be a better place to look.

Sankara only held presidential office for four years before his death (1983–1987), but his tenure is seen as one of the most influential of any president in West African history. Often referred to as the 'Che Guevara of Africa', Sankara instituted radically egalitarian reforms in an effort to improve economic self-sufficiency and establish a proud, uniting African culture that did not require financial aid from the West (Sawadogo 2001). He banished international aid organizations and sought to keep the country's domestic food and materials production for internal use—a disturbing proposition to France, the country's former colonizer and primary trade partner. While Sankara made a big international impact with his outwardly socialist policies and friendship with Fidel Castro, his presidency was not to last, and its impact was therefore limited. When Sankara died, Burkina Faso was still incredibly poor, with most of its population relying on subsistence agriculture, a state notably similar to its current environment over 25 years later. While Sankara can be viewed as a unique and bold figure in West African politics, the social environment he cultivated in Burkina did not drastically alter the country's culture. The weak outcome of his attempt to create a unified African identity in Burkina Faso is demonstrated in the continued tension between ethnic groups within the country, comparable to ethnic tensions in many neighboring countries. Small-scale ethnic conflict still exists, partly due to the country's continued dependence on subsistent agriculture and cattle-raising as clashing sources of income for different

ethnic groups of Burkina Faso. After his death, Sankara's economic policies were quickly reversed by his successor, and any lasting impact of his reforms thereby erased. Though he was loved by some, Sankara's conflicted relationship with the country's former colonizer, France, as well as his heavy-handed tactics with the wealthier *fonctionnaire* class have kept Sankara's reputation in dispute within Burkina Faso (Dörrie 2012).

Overall, no uniquely-competent leaders are responsible for Burkina Faso's anomalous position, and until recently, the country's less-than democratic regime has differed little from that of neighboring West African countries. The economic policies enacted by the leadership are also comparable to other nearby former French colonies, and have kept the country in a similar (and in most cases, worse) economic state<sup>4</sup>. In addition, no further attempts have been made to create a particular uniting identity, nationalistic or otherwise, in Burkina Faso since Sankara's tenure, thereby removing any positive action toward national unity as a factor that contributed to the present environment<sup>5</sup>. While Sankara did cause waves for a short time, his ideology and policies were quickly reversed before they could instill a lasting effect on the country and people. Political history therefore cannot be relied upon to explain Burkina Faso's current social climate, and alternative explanations must be explored<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, this evaluation cannot completely be based on a government's competency or leadership capability. Geographic location and natural resources, for example, have also played a large role in determining West African countries' economic success.

<sup>5</sup> This is both through lack of action by Compaoré, and action that was never fully realized by Sankara. While Sankara tried to instill a nationalistic and 'African' identity in Burkina Faso's citizens, Compaoré tried no such identity creation. So while the populous is not actively divided by religious or other emphasized identity markers, they are also not united. Compaoré's actions thus seem to have little to do with ethnic or religious harmony.

<sup>6</sup> As will be explored later, the leaders of Burkina Faso's history can at least be credited for attaching no significance to ethnic or religious groups when seeking election support. In contrast to neighboring West-African countries, where leaders have emphasized their ethnic or religious identity to gain votes, and have therefore uncovered and aggravated differences between groups, politicians in Burkina Faso have attempted no such thing. Such a unique

## **2. Religious Extremism is slowly migrating southward from North African countries, and just has not reached Burkina Faso yet**

This argument holds that social or economic contact between North Africa and sub-Saharan West Africa was nonexistent until recently, when North African influence brought Islamic extremism into sub-Saharan Africa. This explanation can be used to explain the pattern of religious violence as it has swept regionally from North to South in neighboring countries like Mali, Niger, and Mauritania. The religious-based conflict in Nigeria can also be applied here. Though most of the country lies geographically south Burkina Faso, the country is nevertheless divided by Muslim communities of the north and Christian communities of the south, and its Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram is based in the north of the country. These north-south advancements imply a continuous adoption of extremist religious ideology as it spreads southward.

This hypothesis, based primarily on geographical dispersion of Muslim populations across northern Africa and across the Sahara, does not hold up to historical accounts of trade routes and cultural dissemination interconnecting these two areas for hundreds of years. As anthropologist Mahir Saul explains, socio-economic exchange between West Africa and its neighbors across the Sahara desert has existed for centuries:

In premodern times, the dry expanse of the Sahara slowed down contacts between North and West Africa, but only in the manner of a porous membrane. It is no small detail for European history that

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approach to politics is not necessarily due to an altruistic desire for patriotic harmony on the part of the politicians, but may best be explained by Burkinabés' hesitation to establish groups based on certain identity markers, such as religious affiliation. Another factor may be the relatively equal division of the majority ethnic group, the Mossi, between Christian and Muslim adherence, thereby removing any specific ethno-religious affiliation among the ruling political class (which is also made up of the majority ethnic group). The resistance to combining identity markers for political gain has potentially played a significant role in Burkina Faso's tolerant, peaceful social environment.

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much of the gold circulating in Western Europe before the discovery of the Americas was supplied by the West African trade (Saul 2006: 8).

The idea that North African inhabitants had limited contact with sub-Saharan territories, or that their religious practices somehow did not assimilate southward until modern times, is misguided. Saul continues,

Islam arrived in sub-Saharan West Africa more than a thousand years ago, following the westernmost of its three major historical pathways between the Mediterranean coast and the interior: the trade routes leading from Sijilmasa in southern Morocco to the central Niger, the shortest crossing of the inhospitable environment of the desert (Saul 2006: 8)<sup>7</sup>.

Using a purely geography- based argument to explain the dissemination of various understandings of Islam ignores the longstanding, permeable pathways in existence between the two areas and the people inhabiting them.

A necessary implication of this argument is that the countries further south of Burkina Faso show no signs of religious extremism or religious-based violence, which is not the case. Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, all West-African countries located south of Burkina, have experienced religious-based violence, though each country's originating conflict involves an array of factors other than religion. Nigeria's current civil instability is most directly related to religious extremism, primarily from the terrorist group known as Boko Haram, though the success of the group's efforts have been aided by a history of corruption in the Nigerian government. In Nigeria as well as other West African nations, religious violence is tied more directly to the country's unique religious history and political leadership, not simply geographical area. As will be explored later in this article, the relationship between politics, religion and ethnic groups in West African countries is often tenuous, and the strength of the ties between

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<sup>7</sup> Though significant conversion to Islam did not occur in the region until centuries later. As Kobo argues, the 'Islamization' of the majority ethnic group, the Mossi, did not begin until the eighteenth century. See Kobo (2012: 55).

these identity groupings can have enormous effects on the culture and stability of the country. These factors come into play across West-African countries, regardless of their latitude. Geographical placement of the country alone is therefore insufficient as an explanation for Burkina Faso's unique standing.

### **3. Violence exists in Burkina Faso, but it stems from tensions based on ethnic affiliation, taking the focus off of religion as long as ethnic conflict remains the more pressing concern**

Tension between traditional ethnic groups is a longstanding issue across West Africa, often leading to, or drawing the battle lines for, larger acts of violence at a nationwide level. Ethnic conflict has occurred perennially in Burkina Faso, though it has remained small-scale. The presence of ethnic conflict has historically spilled over into religious violence in other West African countries, particularly when one ethnic group is primarily associated with one religious affiliation. Burkina Faso has so far resisted this spillover effect, thereby limiting their ethnic-based conflicts to rare, small-scale incidents and preventing quarrels between ethnic groups from becoming ethno-religious issues. By enacting social rituals and codes of behavior that have long been established to facilitate harmonious cohabitation, ethnic violence is kept under control<sup>8</sup>. The factors that have come into play, both to keep ethnic violence in check and to prevent the identity marker of ethnicity from colliding with the identity marker of religious affiliation, must be given a closer look.

Interactions between ethnic groups across West Africa have long been mitigated through social norms and mutually beneficial partnerships, though some interactions do still escalate into conflict. In Burkina Faso, the most widespread ethnic conflict involves the nomadic ethnic group known as the Fulbe (or commonly, the 'Peulh') against many other ethnic groups that rely on subsistence agriculture for survival. The Fulbe, who originated in northern Burkina Faso and Mali, primarily live a nomadic lifestyle, migrating around the country and across borders with herds of cattle, which are their

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<sup>8</sup> For more on these social rituals, see Hagberg (2006:197-214.)

typical source of income and principal source of conflict with local farmers. Even this ‘conflict’, however, and the prejudiced behavior it incites, can be seen through a more focused lens as a communal strategy for coexisting among clashing economic interests and varied ethnic backgrounds. As Mark Breusers, Suzanne Nederlof and Teunis Van Rheenent explain in their study of tension between Mossi (the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso) and Fulbe:

As one Mossi cattle owner said, relations between the two groups are not what they seem at first sight: We, Mossi and Fulbe, do insult one another, harshly even, but each knows of the other that these are only false insults, only words. In reality, we do understand one another very well. The insults serve to avoid arousing suspicion with the others (Breusers, Nederlof & Van Rheenent 1998: 371).

This observance refers to the concept of ‘plaisanterie’ prevalent in Burkina Faso: the custom of mocking or insulting a historically rival ethnic group to maintain ethnic loyalty in outward appearance, while avoiding escalation into any real violence. This custom is credited as preventing wide-scale violence based on ethnicity, or at least serving in a combination of factors limiting violence (Labouret 1929)<sup>9</sup>.

The presence of ethnic-based conflicts and resolution strategies in Burkina Faso does not explain the surprisingly low level of religious violence in the country, however. In neighboring countries, such as Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, and Nigeria, ethnic difference fused with religious difference to widen the chasm of misunderstanding between groups. Burkina Faso has thus far successfully prevented expansion of ethnic tension into the religious sphere where neighboring countries have failed. In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, political and socio-economic divisions played off of religious and ethnic divisions to escalate emerging conflict surrounding their presidential elections in 1995, though the seeds of the conflict had been planted much earlier. From the colonial era, the country’s plantation economy based on coffee and cocoa had led many immigrants to the southern cities of Côte

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<sup>9</sup> The tradition of *plaisanterie* has a longstanding history of addressing ethnic difference across West Africa, but no such tradition exists regarding religious difference.

d'Ivoire to find work. Many of these immigrants arrived from neighboring countries of the north or east, and most identified as Muslim. Thus, the identity of the Muslim slowly became synonymous with the identity of the poor foreigner, or non-native in Côte d'Ivoire (Miran-Guyon 2012: 98). This anti-Muslim sentiment formed into the national idea of 'Ivoirité', or true Ivoirian nationality, meant to differentiate 'true' Ivoirians from foreign, Muslim migrants. This strategy was used in the 1995 presidential elections to effectively disqualify the Northerner candidate, Alassane Ouattara, who was suspected of having Burkinabé parents.

This intertwining of religion, ethnic group, and nationality as identities in opposition to the foreign identity united groups together in a way that had not been approached before in Côte d'Ivoire. These new formed identities elevated their interests to the forefront of politics and social relations while separate they never would have been powerful enough to launch a civil war. The events that led to the association of poor migrants with the Muslim religion spurred a defensive reaction from Ivoirians who saw their economic advancement threatened, and therefore lashed out politically against those groups. This identity concoction of religion and ethnicity was the fateful brew that made nation-wide violence and upheaval possible in Côte d'Ivoire. This potion has not yet been mixed in Burkina Faso: the economic conditions that led to ethnic and religious violence in Côte d'Ivoire have never materialized in Burkina Faso.

While in many West-African countries religion has played a role in politics and has served as a geographical divider, these relationships do not exist in Burkina Faso. Ethnic tensions still pose both an immediate and long-term challenge to avoiding conflict altogether, but the absence of a force linking any one ethnicity to one religion has kept conflict small in scale. Unlike in the recent political history of Côte d'Ivoire, the population of Burkina Faso has not been politically or otherwise divided over religious difference. A more general conclusion can then be drawn from this case study: West-African countries that have created a link between religion and ethnicity, thereby increasing the perceived differences between groups, can exacerbate conflict and lead to factioning within the country. The absence of a force linking religion to ethnicity in Burkina Faso clarifies why ethnic violence has not spilled over into religious violence the way it has in neighboring countries.

#### **4. The geographic dispersion of ethnic/religious groups across the country has prevented wide-spread religious violence**

This hypothesis claims that the dispersion of numerous ethnic and religious groups across Burkina Faso has prevented religious violence from developing in the country because these groups are in constant contact and forced to cohabitate. The argument rests on the premise that people across Burkina Faso live the interdependent lifestyle led by the majority of rural family/tribal units across West Africa. It also implies that no single religion dominates a major ethnic group to such an extent that that ethnicity becomes associated with that religion-- a combining of identity markers. The existence of both elements of this dynamic represent the best argument for the presence of the tolerant environment Burkina enjoys today.

The community-oriented lifestyle led by most Burkinabé, as well as by the populations of most West African countries<sup>10</sup>, cultivates interdependence by placing community harmony over individual interests or beliefs. Rural communities across West Africa are typically organized into a series of family compounds, constructed with the expectation that members of the family (particularly through the male line) will maintain close family ties throughout life, both geographically and relationally. In Burkina Faso, these rural communities often include more than one ethnic group and more than one religion, even within family compounds. Due to the country's diverse ethno-religious makeup, communal harmony within the close-knit rural setting requires a high level of cross-cultural and cross-religious tolerance, even compared to neighboring countries. For instance, while Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria are ethnically and/or religiously split between the northern and southern regions of their countries, Burkina Faso's ethnic groups are dispersed relatively equally across the country, and its religions

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<sup>10</sup> This is largely the case in rural communities. In Burkina Faso, only 26% of the population lives in urban areas, meaning the vast majority of the population lives in villages utilizing an interdependent living model (Central Intelligence Agency 2013). This is also shown through the number of people who are employed through agriculture, which stood at 84.8% of the population in Burkina Faso as of 2011 (Europa World Plus 2011).

are split relatively equally among those ethnic groups<sup>11</sup>. This ethnic dispersion means that ethnic groups will hardly ever live in an area of the country where they do not encounter someone from a different ethnic group, and that adherents of different religions will inevitably co-exist within the same region, town, or even family compound. While ethnic groups have traditional regions where they inhabit the majority of the population, there is no region where an ethnic group is completely isolated, especially from the most numerous Mossi population and the nomadic Fulbe, both of whom can be found across Burkina Faso. This longstanding contact between different ethnic groups across Burkina Faso has served to establish harmonious or at least tolerant relationships between even the most historically opposed ethnic groups. As Breusers, Nederlof and Van Rheenent observe on the relationship between Mossi and Fulbe:

In contrast to northern Benin or the northern Ivory Coast, for instance, where Fulbe contact with sedentary farmer populations is of relatively recent date, the Central Plateau of Burkina Faso - or at least large parts of it - has been shared by Mossi and Fulbe for several centuries (Breusers, Nederlof & Van Rheenent 1998: 375-376).

As their observations imply, these ethnic tribes in Burkina Faso lived together for centuries in a cultural environment where interdependence is both expected and necessary for survival, thus inter-tribal links are part of their longstanding history.

Due to the large number of ethnic groups in Burkina Faso, as well as the desperate poverty that most of the country still lives in, the communal practices used to aid survival in such difficult conditions have forced a tolerance and acceptance of various beliefs, backgrounds and practices. Out of the interest of survival, many extended family members will often share the responsibilities of raising a child, aiding with food and clothing as

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<sup>11</sup> Concentrations of ethnic groups do exist, however. The Mossi represent the largest ethnic group at 40% of the population, and is generally concentrated in the middle of the country, though is also represented across the country as well. (World Fact Sheet: Burkina Faso). The Bobo are concentrated in the south-west of the country, though are also located throughout the country as well (Europa World Plus 2014).

becomes necessary. These extended family members who are crucial to familial financial support may be of different religious backgrounds, and, less often but still possible, different ethnic groups through inter-marriage. Despite these ideological and cultural differences which may lead to familial rifts in a more prominent society, the necessity of the communal lifestyle for survival in Burkina Faso has led to an environment of required openness and acceptance of various backgrounds and beliefs. Neighboring West-African countries also lead communally-dependent lifestyles, and so this mode of living is not unique to Burkina Faso, but the country's high number of ethnic groups and religious orientations co-habiting in cross-sectors of the country expands the effects of this interdependency into cross-religious and cross-ethnicity understanding.

The dispersion of Muslims and Christians (the two largest religions beyond traditional belief systems) throughout the country, as opposed to concentration into regions and strict separation of religious groups, is unique to Burkina Faso when compared with its neighboring countries, particularly those with a history of religious-based violence. In both Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, the population of Muslims is primarily concentrated in the north of the country, while the south of the country is largely inhabited by Christians. This segregation has led to religious and political tensions between Muslim and Christian-dominated areas, where the geographical, economic, and political factors have combined to initiate violence between ethno-religious factions. In Côte d'Ivoire, religious difference was enhanced through economic competition and political transition, while in Nigeria the ethnic/religious divide created a volatile environment that was exacerbated by the weak political response. In both cases, and across West Africa, ethno-religious divide was intensified in conjunction with a volatile political and economic landscape.

In contrast, religious groups in Burkina Faso are dispersed throughout the country, with a slightly larger Muslim population residing in the north and central regions of the country but also inhabiting southern areas in large numbers, along with Catholics, Protestants, and traditional religion practitioners. This diverse environment has the potential to lead either to constant conflict or orchestrated peace, and it seems Burkina Faso has chosen the latter. The intermixing of religions within regions has cultivated a more open environment, where stigmatization of any one religion, as well as association of one religion with one ethnic group, occupation, or political

party cannot develop as easily as in a more geographically divided religious environment. This dispersion of different groups had led to a necessary cultivation of tolerance by the Burkinabé, who are forced to come into contact with different ethnicities and religions regularly. While other West African countries, most notably Ghana, negotiate a similar ethno-religious diversity (though in Ghana as in Burkina Faso, concentrations of both ethnicities and religions do exist), Burkina Faso has navigated this tolerance of diversity regardless of its particularly low economic growth, lack of democratic leadership, and little geographically desirable land<sup>12</sup>. Burkina Faso's other neighboring countries, namely Benin and Togo, boast similar ethnic diversity, but Burkina Faso remains unique in its widespread acceptance of both Christianity and Islam among its major ethnic groups, thereby safeguarding against the development of ethno-religious alliances<sup>13</sup>.

The importance placed on communal harmony means that decisions on religion are often made while taking community and family relations into account, not through individual conversion experiences. Religious zeal is therefore kept in check by the local community and wider culture, and conversion decisions are often made in a family or communal context. Due to this emphasis on family considerations when approaching religion, religion has not fully emerged as an independent identity marker separate from cultural ties. In his book *Holy Ignorance*, Oliver Roy explains the shift that occurs in religions and their adherents when the religions are separated from their cultural ties:

The deculturation of religion has some fundamental consequences: first of all it transforms the gap between the believer and the non-believer into a barrier, since now they no longer share either religious practice or common values. So all the intermediary spaces of non-practicing believers, nominal followers, culturally religious non-

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, in 2012 Burkina Faso's GDP per head was \$634.3, while Ghana's was \$1604.9 (Europa World Plus 2012).

<sup>13</sup> For more on the religious climate of Togo and Benin, see: 'Religion (Benin)' in *Europa World online*. London, Routledge. <http://www.europa-world.com/entry/bj.dir.103>, and 'Religion (Togo),' in *Europa World online*. London, Routledge. <http://www.europaworld.com/entry/tg.dir.97>.



believers are vanishing .... Deculturation is the loss of the social expression of religion (Roy 2010: 8).

He goes on to note that the relationship between culture, religion, and identity is precarious and can change across time and circumstance. In Burkina Faso, religious ties have not superseded or evolved distinctly from ethnic ties, but instead are navigated together through a decision-making process aimed at family and communal harmony. René Otayek explores this ethno-religious relationship in his extensive work on religion in Burkina Faso. While he argues that separate schooling options for Christians and Muslims (missionary schools for Christian groups, *Madrasahs* for Muslim students<sup>14</sup>) during the colonialist era led to an imbalance of political opportunity favoring Catholic Burkinabé, this advantage has not been abused by cultural or political authorities, therefore maintaining a general indifference to the relationship between religious affiliation and political power by the local population (Otayek 1997). Religion has remained tied into family and cultural interests and is used as a uniting, not dividing, identity marker. The dispersion of religious beliefs both *across* and *within* ethnic groups in Burkina remains a significant contributing factor to maintaining the religious tolerance of the country.

In Burkina Faso, the acceptance of diverse religions among the major ethnic groups has meant that no political party has found it advantageous to exploit religious loyalty for political gain. The heterogeneous spread of religious beliefs across cultures has prevented the association of one religious group with an ethnic/tribal/national identity, making group divisions weaker

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<sup>14</sup> In the colonial period *Madrasahs* were typically considered an inferior education option by the French, as they focused on Koranic study over state-sponsored, secular education goals. They were also seen by some as a method of subversion of the French colonial values, and therefore blocked some routes to civil service and political advancement. However, French colonialists anticipated this potential Islam-based rebellion and counteracted it by encouraging the popularity and advancement of French-friendly Imams and *Madrasahs* and eventually concluded that ‘Islam noir’ (Islam as practiced by Africans south of the Sahara) did not offer the same threat to French authority as Islamic groups in their North African territories. See (Seesemann and Soares 2009) and (Kobo 2009).

and preventing religion from becoming a dividing identity marker between groups. This lack of combined identities in Burkina Faso (religious-ethnic groups, political groups consisting of one religious group, etc.) has kept Burkinabé from forming groups with completely opposing identities, potentially sparing the country violence based on politically-exploited identity differences.

This confluence of identity markers has led to religious violence in neighboring West African countries, namely, Côte d'Ivoire. In Côte d'Ivoire, national identity, and specifically the idea of 'Ivoirité', came to be associated with the 'native' Christian population, therefore excluding the largely Muslim population seen as foreigners. Because the ethnic and native Ivoirian identity took on religious connotations, Muslims became the 'other' or the 'anti' from those who considered themselves indigenous and therefore more worthy to reap economic benefit from the nation's resources. This shift in religion's relationship to national identity (and removal from communal context) changed the religious dynamic, opening a pathway to viewing members of different religions as 'other' because they were now part of a different national identity and economic (and eventually, political) alliance.

Political allegiance can also lead to a shift in group loyalty, and increased divisions between groups when politicians appeal to certain demographics for votes. Rogers Brubaker and David D. researched the outcomes of political campaigns on ethnic/religious identity:

[Ethnic outbidding] can occur in a context of competitive electoral politics when two or more parties identified with the same ethnic group compete for support, neither (in particular electoral configurations) having an incentive to cultivate voters of other ethnicities, each seeking to demonstrate to their constituencies that it is more nationalistic than the other, and each seeking to protect itself from the other's charges that it is 'soft' on ethnic issues. The outbidding can 'o'erleap itself' into violent confrontations, dismantling the very democratic institutions that gave rise to the outbidding (Brubaker & David 1998: 434).

This link created between political parties/candidates and ethnic groups can instigate tension and violence, both within the ethnic group being competed over and between ethnic groups. The combining of identities, including

religious, ethnic, and political affiliation, can draw clear lines between groups where only a permeable barrier lay before. Rogers Brubaker and David D. conclude their study on transforming cultural identities with these remarks:

It should be emphasized that no serious culturalist theory today argues that violence flows directly from deeply encoded cultural propensities to violence or from the sheer fact of cultural difference. In this salutary sense, there are no purely culturalist explanations of ethnic violence; and it is difficult to simply classify as culturalist a work such as Tambiah (1996), in which cultural, economic, political, and psychological considerations are deftly interwoven (Brubaker & David 1998: 445-446).

Their conclusion upholds the idea that a combining of identity markers can lead to increased risk of violence between groups; not culture alone. Cultural differences alone are rarely strong enough to produce wide-spread violence, but when the significance of culture is strengthened through combination with other identity markers, increased inter-group tension and violence can occur. Major political or other nation-wide events serve as catalysts for this combining of identity markers into distinct groups. In his aforementioned work on ethnic identity in post-colonial contexts, Tambiah argues that ethnicity is increasingly becoming the primary identity marker for people in determining socio-political action. He argues that the 'politicization of ethnicity' is the primary force shifting nation-state or class identity to ethnic identity (Tambiah 1996: 22). When politicians reward certain ethnic groups with honors, privileges, or financial rewards, group identification can grow and violence between an 'in' group and 'out' group can emerge<sup>15</sup>.

Burkina Faso has successfully avoided the combining of identity markers and, subsequently, ethno-religious violence, primarily because of the

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<sup>15</sup> Tambiah focuses primarily on ethnic groupings, though this article intends to expand these effects to religious group identity as well. Tambiah concluded that ethnicity would become to most politically-exploited identity marker in post-colonial, heterogeneous countries, arguing that 'A heightened politicization of ethnicity and simultaneously an ethnification of politics are marked features of our time' (p. 31). Such a conclusion does not dismiss the possibility of religion being exploited in similar ways.

wide interspersion of ethnic and religious groups across the country. The various ethnic groups, and primarily the largest ethnic group which holds political power, adhere almost equally to the Christian, Islamic, and indigenous religions present in the country, or syncretic forms of those religions. This splitting of ethno-religious identities among groups has meant that political favoritism toward any single religion is not advantageous and therefore not pursued by political leaders. The dispersion of ethnicities discussed earlier is crucial to this formula: If religious/ethnic groups were isolated from one another, one religion could more easily be identified with one ethnic group, thereby raising the risk of political/social favoritism toward a group and increasing the possibility of differentiation and violence between groups. These two factors; the dispersion of ethnic/religious groups across the country, and the lack of combined identity markers creating political, religious and ethnic alliances, thus work together to provide the most compelling explanation for the uniquely open and tolerant environment in Burkina Faso.

## **Conclusion**

Thomas Sankara changed the former Upper Volta to its current name, Burkina Faso, meaning ‘the Land of Upright People’, yet it is more than just upright people who are responsible for the lack of religious violence in the country; social and geographic factors also play a role. The interdependent lifestyle of Burkinabé family units, combined with the frequent contact with intertwining religions and ethnicities across the country, has led to a unique social environment in Burkina Faso. As development efforts continue in Burkina Faso and the country faces new political leadership, the crossover between ethnic identity and religion should be taken into account. If one ethnic group, particularly the majority Mossi population, becomes associated with one religion, strong ideological opposition could arise out of a perceived ‘otherness’ in the identities of the opposing groups. A relationship between ethnicity and religion can form in many ways, with geographical grouping of one religious group or ethnicity increasing the possibility of a more isolated, in-group identity<sup>16</sup>. In addition, if a communal lifestyle is no longer a

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<sup>16</sup> This balance is precarious and can change with any number of events that emphasize a link between religion and ethnicity, such as a political candidate

financial necessity in Burkina Faso, and influence from the West encourages individualistic, nuclear family designs, the interdependent lifestyle currently enacted both within and between ethnic and religious groups may dissipate. Consequently, the socio-cultural interactions that have encouraged tolerance and openness to all beliefs may instead be twisted to promote strong religious ideology and prejudice.

The Burkinabé also seem to recognize the precariousness of their established balance between religious acceptance and communal harmony. In one instance witnessed by the author, Evangelizing Christians came to an almost exclusively Muslim village in the Central-West region of the country to distribute Christmas presents to local children and proselytize at the local school. The chief of the village became enraged when he realized that the visitors were not simply there for gift-distribution, as they had claimed, but for conversion. This reaction may seem inconsistent with a self-acclaimed tolerant society, but in fact is consistent with the motive behind such tolerance: communal harmony. When one religious group attempts to alter the religious makeup of a community that has found harmony among its members, this threatens the established relationships between community members and can lead to an imbalance of religious adherence and ethnic identity. The first concern in a rural village such as this is communal harmony; any religious conviction that comes later must work in conjunction with this concern.

The potential change in these priorities that could develop with continued exposure to Western cultural models and economic growth must be considered by development organizations and religious groups. If not, inadvertent changes in the socio-economic makeup of the country may tilt Burkina Faso from its current, harmonious balance into a socially detrimental free fall. The tenuous harmony that Burkinabé have created within their country's unique social environment must be remembered as outside forces enter the country and shift the social conditions toward their models of growth and advancement, potentially knocking a long-established communal system down along the way.

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seeking to consolidate a base of Mossi Muslims, for example. An identity shift such as this has already been witnessed in post-colonial India, where the nation of Pakistan was created to accommodate Indian Muslims who had lost their national identity due to religious affiliation.

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Amy Hart

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