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Sociological and Institutional Factors of Religious Conversion in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso'da Din Değiştirmenin Sosyolojik ve Kurumsal Faktörleri

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Cheick Adama Garibou DIALLO
- Corresponding Author -
Ph.D. Candidate, Ankara University, Institute of Social Sciences (Türkiye), Department of Sociology of Religion.
BURKINA FASO.

Prof. Dr. İhsan ÇAPCIOĞLU
Ankara University, Faculty of Divinity, Department of Sociology of Religion.
Ankara, TÜRKİYE.

Abstract

This article develops a document-based, theoretically integrative sociological analysis of religious conversion in Burkina Faso, a country marked by deep religious plurality and an accelerating pace of affiliation change. It bases its analytical framework on the classical sociology of religion — Durkheim's account of collective effervescence and moral solidarity, Weber's theory of charismatic authority and theodicy, Simmel's distinction between religion as form and as content, and Troeltsch's church-sect-mysticism typology — and brings these tools into direct dialogue with Lewis Rambo's stage-model of conversion, Afrocentric frameworks developed by John Mbiti, Lamine Sanneh, and Ousmane Kane, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, and Birgit Meyer's ethnography of West African Pentecostalism. Focusing on a thematically organized, qualitative synthesis of the historical, ethnographic, and demographic literature on Burkina Faso, the article identifies five interacting sociological drivers of conversion — economic precarity and health-seeking behaviour, the institutional capacity of competing religious networks, kinship and marriage pressure, forced displacement linked to the Sahel security crisis, and the persistent cosmological substrate of Mossi traditional religion — and shows how each is refracted through the historically specific configuration of the Burkinabè religious field. On this basis, the article proposes an original four-level model, Religious Capital under Structural Stress (RCSS), linking macro-historical, meso-institutional, micro-relational, and cosmological-symbolic dynamics of conversion, and formulates a set of testable propositions for future empirical research. The article concludes by discussing the methodological limits of document-based synthesis and the policy implications of treating conversion as a structurally conditioned rather than purely doctrinal phenomenon.

Keywords: Sociology of Religion, Religious Conversion, Burkina Faso, Islam, Pentecostalism, Mossi Traditional Religion, Tijaniyya, Religious Capital.

Highlights

- Religious conversion in Burkina Faso results from interacting sociological, economic, and institutional forces that no single-cause model can capture.
- Classical sociology of religion — Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Troeltsch — provides analytical tools for religious solidarity, legitimate authority, and church-sect dynamics that remain under-used in African conversion studies.
- Colonial institutional legacies produced a durable, asymmetric religious field that still structures patterns of affiliation change today.

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- Coexistence and peace in Lagos are shaped primarily through neighborhoods, marketplaces, and everyday public spaces rather than formal institutional arrangements.
- Religion functions not as a fixed source of tolerance or conflict, but as a context-dependent field of influence in social life.

Öz

Bu makale, derin bir dinî çoğulculukla ve değişen dinî aidiyet örüntüsüyle karakterize edilen Burkina Faso'daki din değiştirme olgusuna dair belge temelli, kuramsal olarak bütünleştirici bir sosyolojik çözümleme sunmaktadır. Analitik çerçevesini klasik din sosyolojisi üzerine inşa etmektedir — Durkheim'ın kolektif coşkunluk ve ahlaki dayanışma kuramı, Weber'in karizmatik otorite ve teodise kuramı, Simmel'in dini biçim ve içerik bakımından ayıran yaklaşımı ve Troeltsch'ün kilise-mezhep-mistisizm tipolojisi — ve bu araçları Lewis Rambo'nun din değiştirme modeli, John Mbiti, Lamine Sanneh ve Ousmane Kane'nin Afrosentrik çerçeveleri, Pierre Bourdieu'nün alan kuramı ve Birgit Meyer'in Batı Afrika Pentekostalizmi üzerine etnografyasıyla doğrudan diyaloğa sokmaktadır. Burkina Faso üzerine tarihsel, etnografik ve demografik literatürün tematik olarak organize edilmiş nitel bir sentezinden hareketle, din değiştirmeyi etkileyen birbiriyle etkileşim hâlindeki beş sosyolojik etken belirlemektedir: ekonomik güvencesizlik ve sağlık arayışı davranışı, rakip dinî ağların kurumsal kapasitesi, akrabalık ve evlilik baskısı, Sahel güvenlik krizine bağlı zorunlu yerinden edilme ve Mossi geleneksel dininin kalıcı kozmolojik altyapısı. Bu temelde makale, din değiştirmenin makro-tarihsel, mezo-kurumsal, mikro-ilişkisel ve kozmolojik-sembolik dinamiklerini birbirine bağlayan özgün, dört düzeyli bir model olan Yapısal Stres Altında Dinî Sermaye (Religious Capital under Structural Stress, RCSS) modelini önermekte ve gelecekteki ampirik araştırmalar için sınanabilir önermeler formüle etmektedir. Makale, belge temelli sentezin yöntemsel sınırlılıklarını ve din değiştirmeyi salt doktriner değil yapısal olarak koşullanmış bir olgu olarak ele almanın politika çıkarımlarını tartışarak sona ermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Din Sosyolojisi, Din Değiştirme, Burkina Faso, İslam, Pentekostalizm, Mossi Geleneksel Din, Ticanilik, Dinî Sermaye.*

Öne Çıkanlar

- *Burkina Faso'daki din değiştirme olgusu, tek bir nedene dayalı hiçbir modelin tam olarak açıklayamadığı, birbiriyle etkileşim halindeki sosyolojik, ekonomik ve kurumsal güçlerin bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır.*
- *Klasik din sosyolojisi — Durkheim, Weber, Simmel ve Troeltsch — Afrika'daki din değiştirme çalışmalarında hâlâ yeterince kullanılmayan, dini dayanışma, meşru otorite ve kilise-mezhep dinamikleri için analitik araçlar sunmaktadır.*
- *Sömürgecilik döneminden miras kalan kurumsal yapılar, günümüzde bile aidiyet değişikliklerinin seyrini şekillendiren kalıcı ve asimetrik bir dini alan yaratmıştır.*
- *Mossi kozmolojik çerçevesi, yeni dini kimlikleri süzüp tek bir doktrinsel etiketle indirgenemeyen senkretik oluşumlar üreten sembolik bir zemin işlevi görür.*
- *Makale, din değiştirmenin makro, mezo, mikro ve kozmolojik-sembolik düzeylerini birbirine bağlayan özgün bir bütünleştirici model — Yapısal Baskı Altındaki Dini Sermaye (RCSS) — önermektedir.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion — understood as the process by which an individual or group shifts primary religious affiliation, restructures core identity commitments, and relocates within a new community of practice — has emerged as one of the most consequential social phenomena reshaping West African societies in the twenty-first century.[1] In Burkina Faso, this process is particularly significant. The country has historically been celebrated as a site of remarkable religious coexistence among Islam, Christianity, and Mossi traditional religion; yet qualitative and ethnographic accounts have described a pattern of increasing conversion activity, rising inter-religious tension, and the emergence of new religious actors claiming both

[1] Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 2–5.

spiritual and social authority in contexts of intensifying structural precarity over the last two decades. It should be noted at the outset that Burkina Faso does not conduct a religious-affiliation panel survey, so claims about the pace of change rest on convergent qualitative observation rather than on time-series statistical data.

Sociologists of religion have long insisted that conversion is never a purely interior event, but is mediated by social structures, institutional networks, and historical configurations of power.[2] In the African context, these mediating factors are further complicated by the legacy of colonial religious policies, the persistence of indigenous cosmological frameworks, and the emergence of transnational Islamic and Evangelical networks that compete for converts in economically marginalized contexts.[3] Understanding conversion in Burkina Faso therefore requires an analytical framework that is simultaneously attentive to the universal dynamics identified by classical and contemporary conversion theory and to the particular historical and cultural specificities of the Voltaic plateau.

This article addresses three principal research questions. First, what sociological factors — structural, institutional, and relational — drive religious conversion in Burkina Faso? Second, how do colonial and post-colonial institutional configurations shape the contemporary religious field and the conditions of possibility for affiliation change? Third, what is the specific role of Mossi traditional religion as a symbolic substrate in conversion trajectories, and how does it shape the manner in which converts interpret and appropriate new religious identities?

A scope clarification is needed at the outset. The article's title refers to Burkina Faso as a whole, but its empirical base — a function of which communities the existing ethnographic literature has most thoroughly studied, as Section 2 details — is disproportionately drawn from Mossi communities of the central plateau, with Langewiesche's Yatenga-based fieldwork as the single most load-bearing source. Peul, Gourounsi, Lobi, Dagara, Bobo, and Dioula communities appear in the article primarily through demographic and historical material (Section 4) rather than through comparably fine-grained ethnographic treatment of their conversion dynamics specifically. The findings and the RCSS model developed below should therefore be read as most directly evidenced for Mossi-majority regions and as a set of hypotheses — rather than established findings — for the country's other religious communities; Section 2 returns to this limitation and to what would be required to correct it.

These questions are situated within an existing body of scholarship rather than approached de novo. Langewiesche's longitudinal ethnography of religious mobility in Burkina Faso challenged earlier assumptions about the directionality of religious change and documented the prevalence of fluid, non-exclusive patterns of affiliation.[4] Laurent's account of Pentecostal expansion foregrounded the role of charismatic healing and prosperity theology in

[2] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995 [1912]), 208–216.

[3] Katrin Langewiesche, *Mobilité Religieuse: Changements Religieux Au Burkina Faso* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003), 14.

[4] Langewiesche, *Mobilité Religieuse*, 50–51.

attracting converts from both traditional religion and mainline Christianity.[5] Fancello and Meyer's comparative study on Ghanaian and West African Pentecostalism supplied the conceptual tools for understanding the paradoxical relationship between conversion and tradition that recurs throughout this literature.[6] What this literature has not yet supplied is an account that treats the founders of the sociology of religion — Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Troeltsch — as primary analytical resources rather than as background theory to be gestured at and set aside; nor has it offered a single framework capable of holding the historical, institutional, relational, and cosmological dimensions of conversion together. The present article attempts both tasks.

The security crisis that has engulfed northern Burkina Faso since 2015 sharpens the stakes of this undertaking. It has introduced new actors (jihadist movements, international humanitarian organizations, displaced community leaders), new conversion pressures (coercion, welfare dependency, cosmological disorientation), and new sites of religious negotiation (displacement camps, urban peripheries, militarized zones) with no adequate precedent in the existing literature. The article aims to contribute to the theoretical reorientation this conjuncture demands while remaining grounded in the empirical realities that Burkinabè men and women navigate daily.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the methodological basis of the study. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework, beginning with classical sociology of religion before turning to Rambo's stage-model, Afrocentric frameworks, Bourdieu's field theory, and Meyer's ethnography. Section 4 situates Burkina Faso within its historical and demographic religious landscape. Section 5 analyses the sociological and institutional factors of conversion in detail. Section 6 proposes an integrative model and draws out its implications for research and policy.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article is a document-based, theoretically informed qualitative synthesis rather than a systematic review in the technical sense or a report of original fieldwork. It does not claim the reproducibility standard of a PRISMA-style systematic review; the account below is offered instead as a transparent narrative-synthesis protocol, reporting the same categories of procedural information a systematic review would report, so that the corpus and its limits are visible to the reader.[7]

Corpus construction. The corpus draws on works identified through the authors' engagement with the literature on religion in Burkina Faso together with citation tracing, both

[5] Pierre-Joseph Laurent, *Les Pentecôtistes du Burkina Faso: Mariage, Pouvoir et Guérison* (Paris: IRD Éditions / Karthala, 2003), 45.

[6] Sara Fancello, *Les Aventuriers du Pentecôtisme Ghanéen* (Paris: IRD Éditions, 2006), 13–15.

[7] This procedure follows the logic of a thematic, narrative synthesis appropriate to a fragmented and cross-disciplinary literature; see Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines", *Journal of Business Research* 104 (2019), 333–339.

forward and backward, from Langewiesche (2003) and Laurent (2003), the two most heavily used empirical anchors in the article. The bibliographic details of all cited sources were cross-checked against relevant library, publisher, and repository catalogues (WorldCat, Persée, Cairn.info, the CODESRIA and IRD/Karthala catalogues, and publishers' own listings). Sources were included if they (a) addressed religious affiliation, conversion, or religious institutions in Burkina Faso or the immediately comparable Voltaic/Sahelian context, and (b) were peer-reviewed monographs or articles, doctoral theses, or reports from a national statistical agency or a recognized international, humanitarian, or governmental body; sources were excluded if they were opinion journalism, undated or unattributed web content, or duplicative of a more detailed source already retained. The reference list below contains the full set of sources that are directly load-bearing for a specific claim in the text; the article does not separately report a larger "reviewed but not cited" set, since an inexact figure for such a set would itself undermine the transparency this section is meant to provide.

Synthesis procedure. The corpus was read thematically against the three research questions stated in Section 1, organized around the five factors developed in Section 5 (economic/therapeutic, institutional-organizational, kinship-relational, displacement-security, cosmological-symbolic), and cross-read against the theoretical apparatus developed in Section 3 to identify points of convergence, tension, and explanatory gap between classical sociology, Afrocentric theory, and the Burkinabè empirical record. The article does not report a formal inter-rater reliability procedure, and the presence of two named authors on the byline should not be read as implying one. Source quality was appraised qualitatively rather than through a formal instrument, on three criteria: whether a source reported original fieldwork or was itself a synthesis of others' fieldwork; the recency and duration of that fieldwork relative to the phenomenon described; and whether the source's claims were corroborated by at least one independent source in the corpus — a criterion the article does not treat as satisfied for the post-2015 security-crisis material, whose corroboration remains thinner and more time-bound than the rest of the corpus, as flagged in Section 5.4.

This approach carries specific limitations that condition the epistemic status of the article's claims. First, the corpus is secondary: the article does not report new interview, survey, or observational data, and its empirical anchor — Langewiesche's ethnography — was conducted primarily among Mossi communities in Yatenga province in the early 2000s, before the onset of the current security crisis. Claims about displacement-driven conversion since 2015 are therefore necessarily inferential, built by connecting documented patterns of institutional outreach and cosmological disruption to demographic data on displacement rather than to first-hand testimony from displaced converts. Second, the reliance on published ethnography privileges the populations, regions, and time periods that existing scholars have chosen to study, which has the effect of over-representing Mossi Muslim-Christian dynamics on the central plateau relative to Peul, Gourounsi, Lobi, Dagara, and other communities, and of under-representing the specifically gendered and generational dimensions of conversion that

this article's own conclusion identifies as a priority for future research. Third, a document-based synthesis cannot adjudicate between competing causal claims with the confidence that a purpose-designed mixed-methods study could; its findings should be read as an integrative theoretical model and a set of testable propositions, not as a substitute for primary data collection.

These limitations do not, in the present view, disqualify the exercise; rather, they define what kind of contribution it can make. Given that active insurgency across much of northern and eastern Burkina Faso currently forecloses the kind of extended field access on which Langewiesche's or Laurent's own research depended, a rigorous synthesis of the existing documentary record — read critically and against a strengthened theoretical apparatus — is a necessary and defensible preliminary step, whose explicit function is to generate propositions that future field research, conducted when access permits, can test directly.

Ethical Statement: This study is based entirely on published sources and involved no human subjects, interviews, or fieldwork; no ethics committee approval was therefore required. All sources used have been cited in accordance with the principles of academic honesty and transparency, and the authors have not compromised scientific integrity or objectivity at any stage of the analysis. This article draws on the author’s ongoing doctoral dissertation, “Factors Affecting the Phenomenon of Religious Conversion in Burkina Faso” (Ankara University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Philosophy and Religious Sciences, Department of Sociology of Religion), being conducted under the supervision of Prof. Dr. İhsan Çapcıoğlu.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Classical Sociology of Religion: Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Troeltsch

Any sociological account of religious conversion in Burkina Faso must begin with the discipline's own founders, since it is their conceptual vocabulary — solidarity, authority, form, and church-sect differentiation — that makes it possible to describe conversion as a social rather than a purely doctrinal event. Émile Durkheim's argument in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life is the starting point. For Durkheim, religion is fundamentally the symbolic representation of society to itself: the sacred/profane distinction organizes collective life, and ritual gatherings generate what he calls collective effervescence, a heightened emotional state in which individual consciousness is temporarily absorbed into a shared moral community.[8] Conversion, on this reading, is not primarily a change in propositional belief but a relocation from one moral community — one structure of collective effervescence and shared sacred objects — to another. The Basga festival of ancestral veneration among the Mossi and the collective dhikr circles of the Tijaniyya order are, in Durkheimian terms, functionally

[8] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 218–224.

comparable mechanisms: both generate the periodic effervescence that binds individuals into a bounded moral community and marks the boundary between insider and outsider.[9]

Max Weber provides two further tools indispensable to this article. The first is the theory of charismatic authority: religious leaders — the Tijaniyya muqaddam, the Pentecostal prophet-pastor — derive legitimacy not from bureaucratic office or traditional inheritance alone but from a perceived extraordinary quality, a charisma, that followers recognize and validate through their allegiance.[10] Weber's account of the routinization of charisma — the process by which a charismatic leader's authority is stabilized into durable office, lineage succession, or bureaucratic organization — describes precisely the trajectory of the Tijaniyya order from Al-Hajj Umar al-Futi's nineteenth-century campaigns to its present-day institutional establishment. The second Weberian tool is the theodicy of (mis)fortune: religions offer differing explanations for undeserved suffering and differing promises of compensation, and populations under acute economic or physical distress are, on Weber's account, disposed toward religious movements that offer a compelling theodicy together with concrete paths to relief.[11] The prosperity gospel's promise that material blessing follows correct spiritual alignment, examined in Section 5.1 below, is a theodicy in precisely this Weberian sense, and its elective affinity with the aspirations of economically precarious Burkinabè households — rather than any doctrinal superiority — helps explain its recruitment success.

Georg Simmel's essays on religion contribute a distinction that is easily lost in accounts organized around doctrinal content: the difference between religion as a fixed set of institutional contents and religiosity (Religiosität) as a general form or mode of relating — to other people, to authority, to the transcendent — that can migrate across institutional boundaries.[12] Simmel's form/content distinction offers a more precise sociological vocabulary for what the existing literature on Burkina Faso calls dual affiliation or religious mobility: it is not that Mossi converts hold two sets of doctrinal content simultaneously, but that a single underlying religious form — a mode of relating to ancestral and spiritual authority — persists and is re-expressed through successive institutional contents, whether Tijaniyya Islam, Pentecostal Christianity, or traditional cult practice.

Ernst Troeltsch's church-sect-mysticism typology, finally, supplies the analytical language needed to explain why different religious organizations in Burkina Faso pursue markedly different recruitment strategies. Troeltsch's church-type organization is socially integrated, territorially inclusive, and accommodationist toward the surrounding social order; the sect-type organization is voluntaristic, exclusive, and oppositional, demanding a sharper

[9] For the classic application of Durkheimian ritual theory to African contexts, see Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 424–429, on the general mechanism of periodic ritual assembly.

[10] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993 [1922]), 46–59.

[11] Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 138–150.

[12] Georg Simmel, *Essays on Religion*, ed. and trans. Horst Jürgen Helle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 101–115.

break from prior social ties.[13] As Section 5.2 develops in detail, the historically established Tijaniyya order functions structurally in a manner analogous to Troeltsch's church-type — territorially embedded, intergenerational, accommodationist toward Mossi political authority — while reformist Salafi movements and Pentecostal churches function analogously to his sect-type, recruiting through voluntary, often generationally disruptive commitment that requires a more visible break with prior religious practice. This analogy is a heuristic transposition, not a claim that Islamic confraternities and Christian denominations are institutionally equivalent to the European church-sect pairs from which Troeltsch's categories were drawn; it is used here only insofar as it captures a shared structural logic of territorial inheritance versus voluntary recruitment, and the following sections apply it with that qualification in view.

Read together, these four classical resources are not preliminary theoretical framing before the article's substantive analytical work; they constitute the conceptual infrastructure on which the rest of the article relies. Durkheim explains why kinship-embedded ritual participation (Section 5.3) binds or expels; Weber explains why charismatic religious entrepreneurs and prosperity theology (Section 5.1) succeed under conditions of structural stress; Simmel explains why Mossi religious mobility (Section 5.5) is sociologically coherent rather than anomalous; and Troeltsch explains why institutional competition (Section 5.2) takes the specific organizational forms that it does. Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Troeltsch are, for this reason, treated as the indispensable theoretical core of the article: each supplies one non-substitutable level of the RCSS model developed in Section 6. The remainder of this section situates these four classical tools alongside a second, auxiliary tier of theory — Rambo's stage-model, the Afrocentric frameworks of Mbiti, Sanneh, and Kane, Bourdieu's field theory, and Meyer's ethnography — which this article uses to specify and empirically ground particular classical mechanisms (Bourdieu formalizing Weberian legitimate authority at the macro level; Mbiti and Sanneh giving ethnographic content to the Simmelian form/content distinction) rather than to introduce additional, independent levels of explanation. Readers most interested in the RCSS model itself may treat Sections 3.2–3.5 as elaborating this auxiliary tier before the model is assembled in Section 6.

3.2. Rambo's Stage-Model of Conversion

Lewis Rambo's stage-model remains the most cited and most systematically developed framework in the academic study of religious conversion. First published in 1993, the model identifies seven sequential but non-linear stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences.[14] Its strength for the Burkinabè case lies in situating individual conversion within structural contexts — what Rambo calls the macro and meso levels of analysis — without reducing the phenomenon to structural determinism. Rambo insists that the context of conversion encompasses not merely the immediate social

[13] Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon, 2 vols. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931 [1912]), 1: 331–343.

[14] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 5–9.

environment of the convert but the broader historical, political, and economic structures shaping the available repertoire of religious options, a claim that converges directly with the Weberian and Durkheimian emphasis on structural and communal mediation set out above.

The stage of crisis is particularly salient in the Burkinabè context. Rambo defines crisis broadly to include not only dramatic personal catastrophes but chronic conditions of deprivation, marginalization, and unfulfilled aspiration that create a readiness for change.[15] In Burkina Faso, crisis is frequently biomedical — a child's persistent illness, a difficult pregnancy, the failure of traditional healing to provide relief — or economic, including failed harvests, business losses, or the inability to meet brideprice obligations. These crises generate what Rambo terms a quest for new sources of meaning, efficacy, and social support, which religious institutions are strategically positioned to address — a dynamic that, read through Weber, is precisely a search for a more satisfying theodicy of misfortune.

Rambo's model was nonetheless developed primarily with reference to North American and European cases, and its application to the West African context requires critical adaptation. Its implicit assumption of a bounded individual self choosing between clearly differentiated religions maps poorly onto the Mossi cosmological world, where boundaries between religious traditions are frequently permeable and where conversion may represent not a rejection of prior affiliation but a strategic expansion of spiritual resources.[16] This is exactly the point at which Simmel's form/content distinction becomes analytically necessary rather than merely supplementary: the Mossi engagement with religious life as an open-ended relation to multiple sources of spiritual power, rather than an exclusive commitment to a single system, challenges the either/or logic underlying much Western conversion theory.

3.3. Afrocentric Frameworks: Mbiti, Sanneh, and Kane

John Mbiti's foundational claim that African traditional religion constitutes a coherent ontological system — centred on communal time, ancestral continuity, and the primacy of communal identity — provides an essential corrective to models that treat conversion in Africa as a move from a primitive religious stage to a world religion.[17] For Mbiti, the African is not merely a potential convert to Islam or Christianity but a religious subject who brings to the encounter with world religions an elaborate symbolic universe that actively filters, transforms, and selectively appropriates new doctrines.[18] This perspective radically reframes the conversion process: it is not a one-way transmission of religious content from missionary to convert but a dialogical negotiation in which African agents play an active, constitutive role.

Lamine Sanneh's concept of translatability — the capacity of Christianity, and by extension Islam, to be appropriated into vernacular cultural frameworks without losing its core

[15] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 78.

[16] Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (London: Watts, 1966), 14.

[17] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1–3.

[18] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 15–20.

doctrinal content — extends Mbiti's insight by identifying the structural conditions that enable or constrain this appropriation.[19] Sanneh argues that missionary success in Africa owed less to European cultural imposition than to the vernacular Bible's capacity to legitimate and reinforce indigenous cultural forms. When the message of the Gospel — or the Quran — could be heard in one's mother tongue and interpreted through familiar conceptual categories, it carried an authority that Arabic or Latin could never achieve among non-literate populations.[20]

Ousmane Kane's work on non-Europhone Muslim intellectuals adds a crucial institutional dimension. Kane demonstrates that the production and transmission of Islamic knowledge through Arabic, Ajami, and African vernacular intellectual networks created an influential non-Europhone scholarly class across West Africa, one whose networks of doctrinal transmission compete effectively with both colonial educational legacies and secular nationalist frameworks.[21] The graduates of Quranic schools who command Arabic literacy alongside vernacular religious authority constitute a distinct intellectual class whose influence on conversion patterns in West Africa has been systematically underestimated by scholarship focused on Francophone elites.[22]

3.4. Bourdieu's Religious Field and Institutional Competition

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the religious field — a structured space of positions and position-takings in which religious specialists compete for the legitimate management of the goods of salvation — provides an indispensable analytical tool for understanding the competitive dynamics of religious change in Burkina Faso, and formalizes, in explicitly relational terms, the Weberian problem of legitimate religious authority discussed in Section 3.1.[23] Bourdieu's framework allows conversion to be analysed not merely as individual spiritual movement but as the outcome of competition between religious institutions that deploy different forms of capital — economic, social, symbolic — to attract and retain adherents. The religious field in Burkina Faso is particularly competitive because no single institution commands sufficient capital to monopolize the legitimate definition of the sacred.[24]

Bourdieu's emphasis on the historical production of the religious field is especially relevant here. The colonial period did not merely introduce new religions to the Voltaic plateau; it restructured the entire field of symbolic competition by granting differential access to political power, economic resources, and educational credentials to different religious groups.[25] The post-colonial state inherited this asymmetric field and has been unable or unwilling to fundamentally restructure it, with the result that conversion trajectories today

19 Lamine Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 22–26.

20 Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 29–35.

21 Ousmane Kane, *Non-Europhone Intellectuals* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2012).

22 Kane, *Non-Europhone Intellectuals*.

23 Pierre Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field", *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991), 40–44.

24 Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure", 12–15.

25 Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure", 18.

remain profoundly shaped by colonial-era inequalities in religious capital — a claim developed empirically in Section 4.2 and built into the macro level of the RCSS model proposed in Section 6.

3.5. Meyer's Ethnography of Pentecostalism and the Break with the Past

Birgit Meyer's ethnographic work on Pentecostalism in Ghana provides a model for understanding the complex relationship between conversion and tradition in the West African context.[26] Meyer's central argument is that Pentecostal conversion in West Africa does not simply erase traditional religious frameworks but enters into a paradoxical relationship with them: the Pentecostal emphasis on breaking with the past requires the prior acceptance of traditional categories of evil, spiritual power, and ancestral agency. Pentecostal Christians in Meyer's fieldwork sites did not deny the power of traditional spirits — they affirmed it, but redescribed it as demonic power against which the Holy Spirit must do battle.[27]

This dynamic — which Meyer terms the diabolization of traditional religion — is directly observable in the Burkinabè context, where Pentecostal deliverance rituals frequently mobilize Mossi cosmological categories even as they claim to supersede them.[28] The result is a form of conversion that is simultaneously a rupture with and a confirmation of the traditional symbolic order, producing religious identities that are neither fully traditional nor fully modern in any simple sense — a further instance, in Simmel's terms, of religious form persisting across a change of institutional content.

4. THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF BURKINA FASO

4.1. Pre-Colonial Religious Configurations: Islam and the Mossi Kingdom

Islam first penetrated the Voltaic plateau through the networks of Dyula and Hausa traders who traversed the trans-Saharan commercial routes from at least the fourteenth century onward.[29] Its institutionalization as a mass religious system came far later, however, and was decisively shaped by the political dynamics of the Mossi kingdom. The Mogho Naaba — the supreme ritual and political authority of the Mossi — maintained a distinctive relationship to Islam characterized by pragmatic alliance rather than wholesale doctrinal adoption.[30] Muslim scholars and merchants were welcomed at the royal court of Ouagadougou as sources of literacy, commercial expertise, and diplomatic connection; the Mossi ruling class nonetheless declined to convert, preserving the traditional religious legitimation of Naam (royal force) that grounded their authority.

This political configuration produced a model of religious pluralism institutionalized before the colonial encounter. Islam was present, commercially significant, and tolerated, but

[26] Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: E.U. Press, 1999), 3.

[27] Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, 55.

[28] Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, 68–72.

[29] Nehemia Levtzion, *Islam in West Africa: Religion, Society and Politics to 1800* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), 34–38.

[30] Michel Izard, *Le Yatenga précolonial* (Paris: Karthala, 1985), 33.

occupied a clearly subordinate position in the symbolic order, defined by its instrumental utility to the Mossi state rather than by any claim to universal religious authority.[31] The arrival of the Tijaniyya Sufi order in the nineteenth century, following the campaigns of Al-Hajj Umar al-Futi, introduced a more universalist form of Islamic expansion that challenged this accommodation, but the Mossi kingdom's political resilience prevented the complete Islamization that occurred in neighbouring Dyula territories.[32]

4.2. Colonial Legacies and the Restructuring of the Religious Field

French colonial rule — beginning with the pacification of Mossi territory in 1896 and lasting until independence in 1960 — profoundly restructured the religious field of what would become Burkina Faso.[33] French laïcité formally separated religious and state institutions but in practice produced a deeply uneven playing field. Catholic missions enjoyed privileged access to the colonial educational apparatus, producing a French-educated elite that occupied the commanding heights of the post-colonial state; Protestant missions, operating chiefly in the southern regions, produced a second tier of literate converts whose influence on the post-colonial field was significant but subordinate.

Islam, by contrast, was treated by colonial authorities with a mixture of suspicion and pragmatic accommodation. French colonial Islam policy — informed by the tradition of politique des égards — sought to contain rather than suppress Islamic influence, working through cooperative Muslim intermediaries while restricting the expansion of Quranic education and the circulation of Arabic texts.[34] In Troeltschian terms, colonial policy effectively pushed Islam toward a sect-like institutional posture relative to the state even as it retained majority popular following, entering the post-colonial period with a large following but a thin institutional infrastructure, disadvantaged in competition with Catholic missions for access to state resources and educational credentials.

This colonial restructuring produced lasting effects on conversion patterns. Post-colonial converts to Christianity were frequently motivated by the desire to access the educational and social capital associated with mission schooling.[35] Post-colonial converts to Islam were more frequently motivated by commercial networks, kinship ties to established Muslim communities, and — increasingly from the 1970s onward — by the growing prestige of reformist Islamic movements financed by Gulf petrodollars.

31 Albert Balima, *Genèse de la Haute-Volta* (Ouagadougou: Presses Africaines, 1969), 12.

32 Jean Audouin and Raymond Deniel, *L'Islam en Haute-Volta à l'époque coloniale* (Paris–Abidjan: L'Harmattan–INADES, 1978), 22.

33 Joseph-Roger de Benoist, *Église et Pouvoir Colonial Au Soudan Français* (Paris: Karthala, 1987), 67.

34 Richard Otayek, "Le Radicalisme Islamique Au Sud du Sahara", in *Islam et Islamismes Au Sud du Sahara*, ed. Richard Otayek (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 14.

35 Felice Dassetto et al., *L'Afrique, Enjeu Chrétien* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), 78.

4.3. Contemporary Religious Demography

According to the 2019 national census, Burkina Faso's population of approximately 21 million is approximately 61% Muslim, 23% Christian (predominantly Catholic), and 15% practitioners of traditional religion, with small but growing Evangelical and new religious movement communities.[36] These aggregate figures mask significant regional and ethnic variation. In the northern and eastern provinces — where Peul and Touareg populations predominate and where the security crisis has been most acute — Muslim populations exceed 90%, while Catholic missions and Protestant churches dominate in the south-western and central regions populated primarily by Lobi, Dagara, and Gourounsi communities.[37]

The Mossi, who constitute approximately 50% of the national population and are concentrated on the central Voltaic plateau, present a more complex picture. Although officially the majority of Mossi identify as Muslim, ethnographic research consistently finds that traditional religious practices — ancestral sacrifices, consultation of earth priests (tengsoaba), participation in traditional festivals — remain widespread among formally Muslim Mossi households.[38] This dual-affiliation phenomenon, which Section 3.1 has already reframed in Simmelian terms as the persistence of a religious form across changing institutional contents, is one of the most significant features of the Burkinabè religious landscape and a major analytical challenge for conversion research.

The Pew Research Center's 2010 survey documented exceptionally high levels of religious tolerance in Burkina Faso by regional standards, with strong majorities in all communities affirming positive inter-religious relations and friendship networks crossing religious boundaries.[39] Subsequent developments, however, including the emergence of Ansarul Islam in the northern Soum province in 2016 and the proliferation of armed jihadist movements across the Sahel, have placed this tolerance under severe pressure, generating new dynamics of religious polarization that reshape conversion patterns in ways existing research has barely begun to document.[40]

5. SOCIOLOGICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS OF CONVERSION

5.1. Economic Precarity and Health-Seeking Behaviour

Among the drivers most frequently cited in the existing ethnographic literature on conversion in Burkina Faso is the search for material and therapeutic resources — a pattern that, read through Weber's theodicy of misfortune, is not a debasement of religious motivation but a specific and well-theorized form of it. This literature is qualitative and case-based rather

[36] INSD, *Recensement Général De La Population Et De L'habitation Du Burkina Faso 2019* (Ouagadougou: INSD, 2020), 12.

[37] INSD, *Recensement* 2019, 45.

[38] INSD, *Recensement* 2019, 58–62.

[39] Pew Research Center, *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2010), 52–56.

[40] International Crisis Group, *The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North* (Brussels: ICG, 2017), 9.

than survey-based, so the claim should be read as a recurrent finding across the studies reviewed rather than as a population-level statistical estimate. Both Islamic associations and Pentecostal churches have developed extensive welfare networks — clinics, schools, microfinance schemes, food distribution programmes — that function as powerful conversion incentives, particularly among populations excluded from state welfare provision.[41] Burkina Faso consistently ranks among the world's least developed countries, with over 40% of the population living below the poverty line and a public health system chronically unable to meet basic needs. In this context, the welfare networks of religious institutions represent not peripheral attractions but essential survival infrastructure.

Pentecostal churches have been particularly effective at addressing material crises through the idiom of miraculous healing and prosperity theology. The prosperity gospel — the doctrine that material blessing is the natural consequence of correct spiritual alignment and generous giving to the church — is, in Weberian terms, a theodicy tailored to conditions of acute economic precarity, and it also maps onto Mossi cosmological expectations of religion as a domain of efficacious intervention in the material world.[42] Baraka is, strictly speaking, an Arabic-Islamic concept of divinely conferred blessing that entered Mossi religious vocabulary through the region's long-standing engagement with Islam rather than an indigenous Mossi category; its subsequent absorption into vernacular religious idiom, alongside the traditional belief in the capacity of ritual specialists to manipulate spiritual forces for material benefit, illustrates the kind of cross-traditional borrowing this article's Simmelian argument (Section 3.1) would predict, and it is this hybrid vocabulary — not a purely traditional one — that Pentecostal theological frameworks mobilize and transform, producing a synthesis that feels simultaneously familiar and radically new to potential converts.[43]

Islamic welfare networks, while less spectacular in their therapeutic claims, have demonstrated remarkable institutional durability. The Tijaniyya zakat system, the Mouvement Sunnite's network of Islamic schools, and CERFI (Cercle d'Études, de Recherches et de Formation Islamiques) have created dense webs of mutual assistance that bind converts into stable communities of practice with strong retention — a durability that Section 3.1's Durkheimian reading would attribute to their capacity to sustain regular ritual assembly and collective effervescence, not simply material provision.[44] Field research by Langewiesche reports that economic motivations for conversion — while rarely acknowledged explicitly by converts, who prefer religious idioms of explanation — recur in association with material disadvantage and with proximity to well-resourced religious institutions; this is a qualitative

41 Langewiesche, *Mobilité Religieuse*, 89.

42 Otayek, "Le Radicalisme Islamique", 25.

43 Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 56–60.

44 Muriel Gomez-Perez, "Associations Islamiques à Dakar et à Ziguinchor: Une Culture Militante", *Islam et Sociétés Au Sud du Sahara* 11 (1997), 18–22.

pattern documented within her case material, not a correlation coefficient derived from representative survey data.

This institutional pattern is corroborated by ethnographic fieldwork among confessional NGOs conducted in Burkina Faso in 2010 and 2011: LeBlanc, Audet-Gosselin, and Gomez-Perez found that Catholic organizations were markedly more successful at integrating into professionalized development structures than their Islamic or Protestant counterparts, in part because they could draw on longer-standing volunteer networks and international donor relationships that reformist Islamic associations were, at the time, still building.[45] This differential institutional capacity directly shapes which welfare networks are most available to, and most likely to attract, economically precarious populations, and it anticipates the more general argument about organizational competition developed in the following subsection.

5.2. Institutional Capacity and Church-Sect Competition

The organizational capacity of religious institutions constitutes a crucial structural determinant of conversion patterns, yet its role is frequently under-theorized in studies that focus primarily on individual motivations. In Burkina Faso, the differential institutional capacities of Islamic associations and Pentecostal churches have been dramatically transformed by transnational connections over the past three decades.[46] Read through Troeltsch's typology, this transformation is best described as the proliferation of sect-type challengers against an established church-type formation. The institutionalization of reformist Salafi and Wahhabi Islam — financed primarily by Saudi Arabian NGOs and state institutions — has produced a generation of Burkinabè Muslims educated in the Middle East who return with theological credentials, organizational models, and financial resources that challenge the hegemony of the Tijaniyya establishment.[47]

These returning graduates have founded new mosques, established Arabic-medium schools, launched FM radio stations broadcasting Islamic programming in Mooré and Dioula, and generated political pressure for the expansion of Islamic family law provisions. The competition between the church-type Tijaniyya establishment and sect-type Salafi movements has itself become a driver of conversion, as both recruit aggressively among the religiously uncommitted and among practitioners of traditional religion — precisely the dynamic Weber's theory of charismatic religious entrepreneurship predicts wherever an established religious monopoly is contested by rival claimants to authority.

Pentecostal and charismatic churches, similarly, have transformed their institutional capacity through connection to Ghanaian, Nigerian, and American Evangelical networks.[48] The

[45] Marie Nathalie LeBlanc et al., "Les ONG confessionnelles en Afrique de l'Ouest: un Équilibre Précaire Entre Prosélytisme et Professionnalisme Au Burkina Faso", *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 34/2 (2013), 236–256.

[46] Langewiesche, *Mobilité Religieuse*, 102–110.

[47] Otayek, "Le Radicalisme İslamique", 25.

[48] Fancello, *Les Aventuriers du Pentecôtisme Ghanéen*, 89.

Assemblies of God — the largest Pentecostal denomination in Burkina Faso — grew from a small early-twentieth-century mission into a movement Laurent's fieldwork already documented, by the late 1990s, at roughly 400,000 baptized members nationally, out of a population then of about 10.4 million; the World Council of Churches' member-church profile currently lists the denomination at approximately 800,000 members, consistent with continued growth in the decades since Laurent's fieldwork, though the two figures come from different periods and are not directly comparable as a growth rate.[49] This expansion has been driven by vernacular outreach, healing ministries that directly compete with traditional healers, and aggressive media presence — a sect-type recruitment logic dependent, as Troeltsch's model predicts, on visible, voluntaristic commitment rather than territorial inheritance of membership.

Sanneh's concept of translatability applies directly to both cases. Islamic institutions that have successfully translated their message into Mooré, Dioula, and other Burkinabè vernaculars are reported in the ethnographic literature to attract converts more readily than those operating exclusively in Arabic or French, though no comparative statistical study has measured the size of this gap.[50] Pentecostal churches that incorporate indigenous musical forms, conduct services in local languages, and engage locally meaningful spiritual categories are reported in the ethnographic literature to attract and retain converts more successfully than those that maintain Western liturgical styles, though this is a qualitative pattern rather than a finding from controlled comparison.[51]

5.3. Kinship, Social Networks, and Community Pressure

Social network analysis of conversion in Sub-Saharan Africa points to kinship and peer networks as among the most important channels through which religious change is diffused.[52] In the Mossi context, where lineage solidarity and the authority of elders constitute foundational social values, conversion endorsed or modelled by a respected kinship figure carries exceptional weight. In Durkheimian terms, this is because religious affiliation in a lineage-based moral community is not a private cognitive act but a boundary marker of the collective conscience itself: the conversion of a family elder to Islam or Christianity is reported in the ethnographic case material to be commonly followed by conversions among junior kinsmen, not because of direct coercion but because religious affiliation is understood as a communal rather than individual act.[53] Such itineraries illustrate that conversion in the Mossi

[49] Pierre-Joseph Laurent, "L'Église des Assemblées de Dieu du Burkina-Faso: Histoire, Transitions et Recompositions Identitaires", *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 105 (1999), 71; World Council of Churches, "Burkina Faso", *Member Church Profile*, WCC, Geneva, (Accessed 16 August 2026).

[50] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 75–80.

[51] Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, 17–22.

[52] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 88–92.

[53] Langewiesche's case material from Yatenga gives this pattern concrete ethnographic texture: she traces individual itineraries such as that of a convert she calls Yodogom, whose move from ancestral religion to Christianity followed his father's own conversion, and that of a convert she calls Issaka, whose religious biography passed successively through traditional religion, Islam, and finally Pentecostalism as his kinship position and place of residence changed over time. See. *Langewiesche, Mobilité Religieuse*, 130–135.

context is rarely a single discrete event but a sequence of affiliations tracking changes in lineage authority, migration, and life-cycle crisis.

Conversely, conversion that breaks with lineage religious tradition can provoke severe social sanction, including exclusion from inheritance, marriage networks, and communal ceremonies. Among Mossi communities where traditional religion is the primary basis of collective identity, conversion to Islam or Christianity may be experienced as a form of social death — a severing of the ancestral ties constituting the convert's fundamental social personhood.[54] This social cost of conversion is a key variable explaining the persistence of traditional religion even where Islamic or Christian outreach is intensive and well-resourced.

The marriage market constitutes a particularly powerful mechanism of religious change. In communities where endogamy — marriage within the religious community — is normatively expected, the desire to access attractive marriage partners from majority religious groups constitutes a powerful incentive for conversion.[55] Field research by Langewiesche documents numerous cases of young Mossi men converting to Islam specifically to improve their marriage prospects within Muslim trading communities, and young women converting to Christianity to access the educational opportunities associated with Catholic mission networks.[56]

5.4. Forced Displacement and the Security Crisis

Since 2015, Burkina Faso has experienced a catastrophic deterioration of security conditions in the northern Sahel, Centre-Nord, and Est regions. The insurgency is not reducible to two organizations: it involves jihadist formations affiliated with JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, but also state and allied counter-insurgency forces, government-armed civilian defence militias (the Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie) and older self-defence networks such as the Koglweogo, and inter-communal violence between Peul herders and Mossi and Gourounsi farming communities. Attributing the crisis to jihadist groups alone would flatten this multi-actor landscape and obscure the distinct conversion pressures each actor may generate.[57] More recent monitoring corroborates and updates this picture: by late 2024, an estimated 30 percent of national territory remained outside effective state control, and the government has increasingly relied on the Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie alongside conventional forces.[58] By 2023, the country had over two million internally displaced persons — one of the largest displacement crises in Africa — a figure the humanitarian coordination body ACAPS placed at approximately

[54] Langewiesche, *Mobilité Religieuse*, 155.

[55] Langewiesche, *Mobilité Religieuse*, 167–172.

[56] Langewiesche, *Mobilité Religieuse*, 188.

[57] International Crisis Group, *The Social Roots*, 18–22.

[58] Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2026 Country Report — *Burkina Faso, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh, 2026* (Accessed 16 August 2026).

1.8 million as of late 2022 and rising through 2023.[59] Humanitarian and crisis-monitoring reports describe this displacement as producing conditions of structural vulnerability that plausibly elevate susceptibility to religious change, though — as Section 2 notes — no population-representative data yet measures conversion rates among displaced Burkinabè directly; this connection is treated below as a hypothesis the RCSS model generates (see P4 in Section 6) rather than as an established empirical finding.[60]

Displaced populations, stripped of their kinship networks, land-based religious shrines, and community ancestral structures, are particularly susceptible to the outreach of both Islamic relief organizations and Evangelical churches that combine material assistance with conversion encouragement. In Durkheimian terms, forced displacement dissolves the very moral community whose ritual life previously anchored religious identity, creating exactly the kind of anomic condition under which competing institutions can most readily supply a replacement community and a replacement theodicy of suffering.[61]

The jihadist insurgency has itself introduced a coercive dimension to the conversion process that existing models — including Rambo's — have been slow to theorize.[62] Humanitarian and crisis-monitoring reports describe cases of non-Muslims reportedly pressured to convert as a condition of remaining in their home villages, of traditional religious shrines being destroyed, and of earth priests targeted for violence.[63] The U.S. Department of State's most recent religious-freedom reporting corroborates the general pattern of religiously targeted violence, documenting attacks on churchgoers and clergy through 2023 and attributing the majority of such incidents to Ansaroul Islam, ISIS–Sahel Province, and JNIM-affiliated groups, while cautioning that responsibility for many individual attacks could not be confirmed.[64] These reports come from organizations working under severe access constraints in active conflict zones and should be read as documented incidents rather than as a quantified, population-level pattern. What the reports consistently indicate is that where coercive conversion occurs, it is doctrinally rejected by mainstream Islamic authorities in Burkina Faso and represents an extreme and analytically distinctive form of religious change that demands a separate theoretical framework — and a cautious empirical treatment given the reporting constraints just noted. At the same time, the jihadist presence has generated significant counter-conversion dynamics: Mossi communities that traditionally maintained syncretic

[59] ACAPS, "Burkina Faso: Conflict, Displacement, and Crisis", *Country Analysis, ACAPS, Geneva, Continuously Updated 2023–2024*, (Accessed 16 August 2026).

[60] International Crisis Group, *The Social Roots*, 28–32.

[61] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 100.

[62] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 112.

[63] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 115–118.

[64] U.S. Department of State, *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burkina Faso, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor* (Washington DC: 2024) (Accessed 16 August 2026).

relationships with Islam have in some cases moved toward a more explicit traditional religious identity as a form of cultural resistance.[65]

5.5. The Mossi Cosmological Substrate

A crucial but under-theorized factor in Burkinabè conversion is the role of Mossi traditional religion as a symbolic substrate shaping how converts interpret and appropriate new religious affiliations.[66] Mossi cosmology is structured around several principal categories, three of which are especially relevant here: the Naaba (political-ritual sovereignty, whose legitimacy derives from divine appointment), the Naam (the royal force flowing between the spiritual and temporal orders), and ancestral forces mediating between the living and the dead that must be propitiated to ensure the fertility of the land and the continuity of the lineage — often discussed in the ethnographic literature under the vernacular term kiimse alongside the broader tiim complex denoting medicine, ritual efficacy, and spiritual potency; the precise semantic range of these Mooré terms varies across the ethnographic sources and across dialect regions, and specialist linguistic and anthropological literature should be consulted for a fuller account than this article can offer.[67]

These categories do not disappear at conversion; rather, they migrate into the new religious framework, producing syncretic formations that defy simple categorization as Christian, Muslim, or traditional.[68] In the Simmelian terms established in Section 3.1, this is the clearest possible illustration of religious form outliving a change in institutional content: a Mossi Muslim who consults the tengsoaba (earth priest) before planting, who participates in the Basga festival of ancestral veneration, and who also performs the five daily prayers and observes the Ramadan fast is not, on the reading proposed here, behaving inconsistently within Mossi cosmological logic — the pattern is consistent with a logic of maximizing access to the available range of spiritual resources.[69]

This phenomenon is consistent with Mbiti's broader claim that African traditional religion constitutes a mother tongue of the sacred that persists beneath and within all subsequent religious affiliations.[70] It also explains why conversion in Burkina Faso so frequently takes the form of what Langewiesche terms religious mobility — a fluid movement between traditions that maximizes access to spiritual resources rather than representing a definitive choice of one tradition over another.[71] From a Bourdieusian perspective, this religious mobility can be understood as a form of capital diversification: by maintaining relationships with

65 International Crisis Group, *The Social Roots*, 40.

66 Izard, *Le Yatenga Précolonial*, 77–81.

67 Izard, *Le Yatenga Précolonial*, 77–81.

68 Balima, *Genèse de la Haute-Volta*, 44–48.

69 Langewiesche, *Mobilité Religieuse*, 45–51. This description draws on Langewiesche's general discussion of dual religious practice among Mossi Muslims.

70 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 100–105.

71 Langewiesche, *Mobilité Religieuse*, 45–51.

multiple religious institutions, Mossi converts hedge their spiritual and social bets under conditions of uncertainty. Read alongside Durkheim, it can equally be described as membership sustained in more than one moral community at once — the cosmological analogue, at the micro level, of the institutional pluralism documented at the macro level in Section 4.

6. TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL: RELIGIOUS CAPITAL UNDER STRUCTURAL STRESS

This article set out to explain religious conversion in Burkina Faso without recourse to a single-cause model, and the preceding sections have shown that no such model is adequate to the empirical record. What the article contributes beyond a survey of existing findings is an original integrative heuristic — Religious Capital under Structural Stress (RCSS) — that organizes the five sociological drivers identified in Section 5 into four analytically distinct but causally interacting levels, each grounded in a specific theoretical resource developed in Section 3.

The macro level concerns the historical structuring of the religious field itself: the colonial-era allocation of educational, economic, and political capital across Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic institutions (Section 4.2), theorized through Bourdieu's field theory and Weber's account of legitimate authority. This level explains why the contemporary competition between religious institutions is not a level playing field but one whose terms were substantially set before independence. The meso level concerns institutional capacity and organizational form: the church-type versus sect-type recruitment strategies of the Tijaniyya establishment, Salafi reform movements, and Pentecostal churches (Section 5.1–5.2), theorized through Troeltsch's typology and Weber's theory of charismatic religious entrepreneurship. This level explains why welfare provision, vernacular outreach, and prosperity theology function as differentially effective recruitment technologies depending on an institution's organizational form.

The micro level concerns kinship and relational diffusion: the role of lineage elders, marriage markets, and communal sanction in propagating or blocking conversion (Section 5.3), theorized through Durkheim's account of the moral community and the collective conscience. This level explains why conversion in the Mossi context so rarely resembles an individual, discrete decision and so often resembles a cascade tracking changes in lineage authority and life-cycle position. The cosmological-symbolic level, finally, concerns the persistent substrate of Mossi religious categories — Naaba, Naam, and ancestral mediating forces — that filters and reshapes whatever new religious content is adopted (Section 5.5), theorized through Simmel's distinction between religious form and content and through Mbiti's and Sanneh's Afrocentric frameworks. This level explains why conversion in Burkina Faso so often produces syncretic outcomes rather than clean doctrinal replacement, and why forced displacement (Section 5.4) is so cosmologically disruptive: it severs converts not merely from an institution but from the

land-based ritual infrastructure through which the cosmological-symbolic level is normally sustained.

RCSS is proposed as an integrative arrangement of levels rather than as a new primitive concept of religious capital, and it is worth being explicit about how the term relates to existing usages. Bourdieu's religious capital denotes the specifically symbolic capital a religious specialist or institution accumulates within a religious field and can convert into other forms of capital; RCSS uses this Bourdieusian sense at its macro level but does not extend it, and Section 3.4 and Section 4.2 apply Bourdieu directly rather than through any RCSS-specific redefinition. Stark and Finke's rational-choice usage of religious capital denotes an individual's accumulated familiarity and skill within a particular religious tradition, which raises the switching cost of leaving it — a micro-level, individual-competence concept quite different from Bourdieu's field-level one. RCSS does not adopt the Stark-and-Finke sense at all; the micro level of RCSS is instead Durkheimian, concerned with communal and relational embeddedness (Section 5.3) rather than with an individual's internalized doctrinal competence. Social capital in the Putnam-Coleman sense — networks of reciprocal obligation and trust — overlaps with but is not identical to the RCSS micro level either, since RCSS treats kinship-based religious diffusion as mediated specifically by ritual and moral authority (the Durkheimian collective conscience) rather than by generalized network trust. What RCSS itself contributes, in other words, is not a new definition of religious capital but the explicit vertical linkage of four levels — each already theorized separately, and each already applied to a different sub-literature on Burkina Faso — into a single heuristic whose value lies in making the causal relationships between levels explicit and testable, as the propositions below attempt to do.

Table 1: The Religious Capital under Structural Stress (RCSS) Model — Levels, Variables, and Propositions

Level	Key variables	Theoretical anchor	Empirical location	Proposition
Macro	Colonial-era allocation of educational, economic, political capital across religious institutions	Bourdieu (field); Weber (legitimate authority)	Section 4.2	P1
Meso	Church-type vs. sect-type organizational form; welfare-network capacity	Troeltsch (church-sect); Weber (charismatic entrepreneurship)	Sections 5.1–5.2	P2
Micro	Lineage authority; marriage markets; communal sanction	Durkheim (moral community, collective conscience)	Section 5.3	P3
Cosmological-symbolic	Persistence of Mossi ritual categories across institutional change	Simmel (form/content); Mbiti, Sanneh (Afrocentric translatability)	Section 5.5	P4

Formulated as testable propositions for future field research, the RCSS model suggests: (P1) the strength of macro-level institutional capital predicts an organization's recruitment

reach independently of doctrinal appeal; (P2) sect-type organizations will show higher short-term conversion rates but lower intergenerational retention than church-type organizations, net of welfare provision; (P3) the likelihood of conversion cascading through a kinship network rises with the ritual authority of the converting individual, independently of the convert's own stated reasons; and (P4) the disruption of land-based cosmological infrastructure through displacement increases susceptibility to conversion by mobile religious institutions, independently of the material assistance those institutions provide. Each proposition specifies a mechanism at one RCSS level while holding the others constant, which is what makes the model falsifiable rather than merely descriptive, and each is designed to be tested against primary survey or interview data of a kind the document-based method of this article cannot itself supply — the central methodological limitation identified in Section 2.

The findings hold policy implications. Development and humanitarian interventions in Burkina Faso should be attentive to the ways material assistance is intertwined with conversion incentives, and should design programmes that protect freedom of conscience and reduce coercive conversion dynamics among displaced populations. Because welfare provision is an important channel through which the differential meso-level organizational capacities documented in Section 5.2 appear, in the literature reviewed, to translate into conversion outcomes under ordinary conditions, a humanitarian architecture that routes material assistance through confessional intermediaries plausibly risks reproducing conversion pressure under conditions of displacement; development actors should treat this as a foreseeable sociological risk of institutional design to be monitored empirically, rather than dismiss it as an incidental risk to be managed case by case. This is, again, a proposition the RCSS model generates (P4) rather than a causal finding this article can itself establish.

The state should also invest in inter-religious dialogue institutions that build on Burkina Faso's historic traditions of religious coexistence while addressing pressures generated by the security crisis and by growing competition between reformist Islamic movements and Pentecostal churches. The Conseil Supérieur des Imams, Mosquées et Affaires Islamiques and the Fédération des Églises et Missions Évangéliques have demonstrated capacity for collaborative action in previous crises; in the terms proposed here, such bodies function as a meta-institutional mechanism capable of moderating the meso-level competitive dynamics of the religious field, tempering the zero-sum incentive structure that channels both Tijaniyya-Salafi rivalry and Islamic-Pentecostal competition into increasingly aggressive outreach. Strengthening dialogue institutions is therefore best understood not as a normative add-on to the sociological analysis but as an intervention in the structural conditions this article identifies as driving conversion in the first place.

The academic research agenda on conversion in the Sahel should be expanded along lines this article's own method cannot pursue. Future research should prioritize the gender dimensions of conversion, which remain dramatically underrepresented in existing scholarship

despite evidence that women's conversion trajectories differ systematically from men's; the generational dimensions of conversion, including the distinctive patterns among Burkinabè youth educated in secular state schools versus Islamic schools; the regional dimensions of conversion, given the enormous variation between the Sahel, the Mossi plateau, and the south-western provinces; and the specifically coercive dimensions of jihadist-related conversion, which require both ethnographic documentation and theoretical innovation. Mixed-methods designs combining large-scale survey instruments capable of capturing religious mobility with in-depth qualitative research tracing individual trajectories over time represent the priority methodological task for the next generation of scholars in this field.

Religious conversion in Burkina Faso is, in sum, not merely an object of academic inquiry but a lived reality for many individuals and communities whose choices about religious affiliation carry profound consequences for personal wellbeing, family relationships, community standing, and — in the current context of jihadist insurgency and inter-communal violence — physical security. The RCSS model proposed here is offered not as a closed explanation but as a scaffolding for the empirical work that document-based synthesis cannot itself perform: work that would recognize the full complexity of religious change, respect the agency of Burkinabè women and men in shaping their own religious identities, and name the structural conditions that make religious vulnerability a condition of life for so many.

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