

Interactions between the Moogo and the Arab-Muslim World: Mode of Penetration, Cultural Circulations, and Historical Legacies in Contemporary Burkina Faso

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Abstract

The article investigates the historical relationships between the *Moogo* and the Arab-Muslim world from the 15th to the 19th century. It seeks to analyse how these connections may have influenced the political, economic, religious, and cultural organization of the *Moogo* kingdoms. To do this, the research takes a qualitative approach, combining a critical reading of scientific literature, gathering oral traditions, and comparing them with major historical overviews of West Africa. The findings show that the first contacts between these two worlds were mainly through trans-Saharan trade networks. Over time, these exchanges expanded into religious, intellectual, and diplomatic areas. Specialized groups like the *Yarse*, the *Fulbe*, the *Zāngoeto*, and the *Marānse* played a key role in these exchanges by facilitating the flow of goods, knowledge, languages, and religious practices. However, these influences didn't lead to a full Islamization of political power without challenging customary institutions. In fact, the *Moogo* rulers managed to absorb economic and cultural influences while preserving and maintaining the supremacy of the *Naam* (authority), which remains the foundation of their political legitimacy. The study highlights a process of selective appropriation of outside influences, marked by a controlled openness to regional exchanges. To illustrate this historical dynamic, the article introduces the concept of 'managed political integration', which describes how *Moogo* societies welcomed contributions from the Arab-Muslim world without abandoning their institutional structures. This research adds to the historiography of the *Moogo* kingdoms by going beyond the usual opposition between resistance and Islamization, while highlighting the importance of sociocultural mediations in shaping interactions between the Moogo and the Sahelian areas. Overall, it presents a nuanced and dynamic view of history, where integration and exchange

are at the heart of relations between cultures.

Keywords

Arab-Muslim World, Islamization, Managed Political Integration, *Moogo*, Trans-Saharan Trade

1. Introduction

West African relations with the Arab-Muslim world have been the subject of extensive historiographical inquiry in African studies. For a long time, scholarship focused primarily on military conquests, religious wars, and religious conversions. More recent research, however, has highlighted the richness and diversity of the human, technological, and cultural exchanges that took place across the Sahelian space. Scholars such as [Ki-Zerbo \(1972\)](#), [Triaud \(1973\)](#), and [Kouanda \(1984; 1989; 1995; 1998\)](#) have demonstrated that the spread of Islam in West Africa cannot be reduced to a uniform process or to military conquest alone. Rather, it resulted from gradual and diversified processes shaped by political and economic contexts, in which trading networks, cultural intermediaries, and local strategies played a central role. In this article, the term “Arab-Muslim world” designates neither a single polity nor a homogeneous civilization but the interlinked set of Arab-Berber, Sahelian, and West African Muslim networks that connected the Sudanic space to North Africa and the Hejaz from the medieval period onward. Geographically, it spans the trans-Saharan corridor linking the Maghreb (via Sijilmâsa, Tafilalet, and the Drâa) to the Sahelian entrepôts of *Aoudaghost*, *Timbuktu*, *Djenné*, and *Gao*, and, further south, to the *Hausa* and *Jula-Wangara* commercial zones through which the *Moogo* was reached. Politically and socially, the actors directly concerned with the *Moogo* are not caliphal or state authorities as such, but the merchant diasporas, itinerant clerics, and cultural intermediaries, chiefly the *Yarse*, *Zāngoeto*, *Marânse*, *Jula*, *Wangara*, and *Fulbe*, who carried commercial, religious, and technical influences into *Moaaga* territory.

From this perspective, the *Moose* kingdoms constitute a distinctive case. While neighboring regions such as Macina, Fouta-Djalou, and the Hausa lands witnessed the emergence of Islamic states, the *Moose* kingdoms maintained, until the colonial period, a political system based on the *Naam*, in which the authority of rulers was closely associated with local customs and religious practices. This institutional stability had long fostered the misconception that *Moogo* was a space largely closed to Arab-Muslim influences. Such a view, however, provides only a reductive interpretation of these complex interactions.

The works of scholars such as [Izard \(1971; 1985\)](#), [Kouanda \(1984\)](#), [Otayek \(1996\)](#), [Simpore \(2005\)](#), [Ouédraogo \(1996; 2007\)](#), [Cissé \(2009; 2014\)](#), and [Ouibga \(2026\)](#), among others, shed light on the long-standing and continuous relations that the *Moogo* maintained with the Islamic spaces of West Africa. These interactions went

far beyond the mere dissemination of religious beliefs. They also encompassed trans-Saharan trade, diplomacy, linguistic exchanges, architecture, craftsmanship, education, and social mediation. Specialized communities such as the *Yarse*, *Fulbe*, *Zāngoeto*, and *Marānse* played a decisive role in connecting the *Moogo* to major Sahelian economic and intellectual networks.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain in the literature. Many studies examine these groups in isolation, focusing either on their commercial role or exclusively on their religious functions, without establishing connections between these different dimensions. Moreover, studies of Islam in Burkina Faso often prioritize the colonial and contemporary periods, thereby overlooking the long-term historical dynamics that continue to shape contemporary religious coexistence. There is also a tendency to contrast the political resistance of the Moose kingdoms with the expansion of Islam, without examining how a society can firmly integrate external influences while preserving its institutional structures.

This article seeks to address these gaps by examining relations between the *Moogo* and the Arab-Muslim world through the concept of managed political integration. This approach assumes that external influences do not mechanically transform existing power structures. Rather, they are filtered, adapted, and reinterpreted by host societies. In the case of the *Moogo*, this process facilitated the gradual diffusion of Islam and various cultural practices without undermining the legitimacy of the *Naam*.

The central research question is therefore: How did *Moose* institutions integrate Arab-Muslim influences while preserving their autonomy?

The overall objective of this study is to examine the historical mechanisms of convergence that fostered the coexistence of cultural openness and institutional continuity within the *Moogo*. More specifically, it seeks to identify the networks through which Arab-Muslim influences circulated, analyze the role of cultural intermediaries, and assess linguistic, architectural, and religious transformations.

This research is based on three assumptions. First, the diffusion of these influences followed commercial routes and relied primarily on non-military agents rather than military conquest. Second, the strength of *Moaaga* institutions contained this diffusion while limiting its political implications. Third, contemporary forms of religious coexistence in Burkina Faso are rooted in these historical processes of interaction among political authority, customary institutions, and Islam.

This article is divided into three sections. The first presents the theoretical framework, historiographical debates, and methodology. The second examines the channels of interaction and their economic, cultural, linguistic, architectural, and religious outcomes. The third discusses the findings. To establish this diagnosis, it is first necessary to clarify the research approach and the sources upon which the analysis is based.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Study

This study adopts a connected history framework rather than a strictly compara-

tive approach. It does not simply juxtapose two entities, the *Moogo* and the Arab-Muslim world, in order to identify their similarities and differences. Rather, its objective is to reconstruct the concrete circulations, human actors, and material objects that actually brought these spaces into contact. This methodological choice is based on a finding widely recognized in West African historiography: The Islamization of the Western Sudan and its southern margins spread less through conquest than through the economic networks of specialized merchant diasporas, including the *Jula* in *Malinke* territories, and the *Yarse* and *Zāngoeto* in *Moaaga* territories.

Analysing these groups thus allows for a more precise tracing of the actual channels through which Islam became established in the region, more accurately than a state-centered approach alone would allow (Niane, 1987). The Islamization of sub-Saharan Africa, which began intermittently as early as the first centuries of the Caliphate, became more systematic from the seventeenth century onward and continued through the twentieth century.

This process was greatly facilitated by the expansion of trade networks, as well as by the incorporation of Islam into the political sphere, where it was adopted as an official or court religion across several polities (Capel, 2022: pp. 100-101). The documentary corpus used in this study draws on three main categories of sources.

The first consists of general historical works dealing with West Africa before the colonial period. Among these, Joseph Ki-Zerbo's *Histoire de l'Afrique Noire* (Ki-Zerbo, 1972) and D. T. Niane's *Le Soudan Occidental au Temps des Grands Empires* occupy a particularly important place.

The second category comprises specialized monographs on *Moaaga* society, the *Yarse*, and other itinerant traders, such as the *Marānse* (Songhai) and the *Zangoeto* (Hausa). It includes the studies of M. Izard on *yarga* trade in the precolonial *Yategnga* and on the political institutions of this kingdom (Izard, 1971; 1985). It also draws extensively on A. Kouanda's research into the sociological and religious integration of the *Yarse* into *Moaaga* society (Kouanda 1981; 1984; 1989; 1995), as well as on Ibrahima Ouibga's recent doctoral dissertation (Ouibga, 2026), which examines the socioeconomic role of the *Yarse*, *Zāngoeto*, *Fulbe*, and *Marānse* in the dual diffusion of Islam and trade throughout the *Moogo*.

The third category, focusing on contemporary transformations of Islam in Burkina Faso, is represented by R. Otayek's seminal study of the political sociology of Islam in the former Volta region (Otayek, 1996), A. Ouédraogo's research on religious education and mosques (Ouédraogo, 1996; 2007), and I. Cissé's contributions on the economy and Wahhabism in Burkina Faso (Cissé, 2009; 2014), and the International Crisis Group report on the religious balance in Burkina Faso (International Crisis Group, 2016).

This body of documentary evidence is complemented by architectural and material sources, which make it possible to examine the architectural corpus associated with Islam in *Moaaga* territories. This dimension draws on the various contributions of S. B. Aradeon concerning the controversial issue of the transmission

of North African architectural technology to the Western Sudan (Aradeon, 1989), as well as the seminal work by Bourgeois et al. on the tradition of earthen architecture in West and Saharan Africa (Bourgeois et al., 1989).

The analysis operates at three interconnected scales. The first is the macro-regional scale, encompassing trans-Saharan trade and caravan routes. The second is the meso-level, focusing on the *Moogo* kingdoms (Tenkodogo, Waogdgo, Yategnga, etc.). The third is the micro-level, centered on intermediary social groups—the *Yarse*, *Marka*, *Zāngoeto*, *Marānse*, and *Fulbe*—who were directly involved in transmitting Islam into royal courts. This intermediate scale, often overlooked in favor of a binary opposition between the *Naam* (political authority) and Islam, constitutes the preferred entry point for the analysis developed below.

This article does not claim to reconstruct a definitive factual account of the first encounter between the *Moogo* and Islam. Rather, by cross-referencing available written sources, critically examining oral traditions, and secondary syntheses, it seeks to reconstruct a plausible chronology and geography of Arab-Muslim penetration, while acknowledging the limitations inherent in the study of societies whose historical transmission has predominantly relied on oral traditions. The oral traditions used here were collected in *Moore*, primarily from the entourage of the *Nanambse* (chiefs), the *Yarnanambse* lineages, the former *Zāngoeto* and *Marānse* of *Waogdgo*, and its subordinate chiefdoms (*Nobre*, *Lale*, *Kōnkiistenga*, etc.). They were transcribed and translated before analysis. When an oral account corroborated a written source (Izard, Niane, Simporé, Kouanda, Ouibga, among others), it was considered corroborated. When it remained isolated or deviated from the written account, it appeared in the text as indirect testimony, not as established fact. In this case, the account served to document collective memory, not to resolve disputed points of chronology.

A final methodological consideration concerns the geographical scope of the study. The term *Moogo* is used here, in accordance with historiographical convention, to designate the political and cultural space structured around the distinctive authority of the *Moognaaba* of *Waogdgo* (Ouagadougou), together with the autonomous *Nanambse* (chiefs) related to him through the dynastic lineage, namely, the ancestral kingdom of *Tenkodogo* and the descendant kingdoms of *Yatēnga* and *Boussouma*. This definition excludes the so-called “segmentary” societies of western and southwestern present-day Burkina Faso, such as the *Bwaba*, *Gouin*, and *Senufo*, whose histories of interaction with Islam developed along significantly different trajectories and did not form part of the same political system.

With this geo-historical framework and these methodological precautions in place, it is now possible to present the findings of the investigation, following the sequence of the channels of penetration identified: trade, *Yarse* mediation, language, architecture, political authority, and finally colonial and contemporary transformations.

3. Findings of the Study

With the theoretical and methodological framework now established, it is necessary to reconstruct, section by section, the concrete channels through which the Arab-Muslim world penetrated the *Moogo*. This reconstruction begins with the oldest and most far-reaching of these channels: trans-Saharan trade.

3.1. The Role of Trans-Saharan Trade in Establishing the First Contacts between the Moogo and the Arab-Muslim World (15th-16th Centuries)

Trans-Saharan trade was a decisive factor in establishing the earliest contacts between West African populations and the Islamic world. These relations were not limited to the exchange of goods; they also served as vehicles for cultural and religious diffusion, contributing decisively to the gradual Islamization of the region. In this regard, C. Capel notes:

“Although the timing, forms, and agents of Islamization differed from one place to another, an overall dynamic can nevertheless be identified. An initial phase of contact with Islam began as early as the seventh and eighth centuries in the wake of merchants [...] Muslim communities subsequently appeared on African soil, concentrated in commercial cities (such as *Aoudaghost* in Mauritania, *Tadmekka* in Mali, and *Dongola* in Sudan, among others), where sharing a common intellectual horizon was certainly an advantageous vehicle for trade. Islam and commerce remained closely intertwined, particularly through Islamized merchant communities (the *Hawsas*, *Dioulas*, and *Swahilis*) who, by traveling through rural areas, gradually extended the influence of the religion beyond urban elites” (Capel, 2022: pp. 100-101).

Indeed, from the end of the second millennium onward, trans-Saharan trade connected the Western Sudan to the Mediterranean and the Hejaz, within a system of exchanges whose prosperity between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries has been documented by D. T. Niane. These commercial exchanges contributed to the emergence in the Western Sahel of empires, kingdoms, and city-states whose prosperity was largely based on trans-Saharan trade. These included *Ghana*, *Soso*, *Mali*, *Songhai*, and *Kanem-Bornu*, among others. Through trans-Saharan trade, numerous Arab-Berber merchants settled in *Walata*, *Niani*, *Timbuktu*, and *Gao*, among other places (Niane, 1987: p. 27).

Grégoire et al. reach a similar conclusion, emphasizing that the Sahel has always constituted a zone of interaction between the Sahara and the southern savannas. This flourishing trade gave rise to major merchant cities such as *Koumbi-Saleh*, *Timbuktu*, *Gao*, *Djenné*, *Agadez*, and *Kano*. These cities also maintained strong connections with southern Morocco, Tripolitania, and even Egypt, serving as major hubs in caravan trade through which goods were exchanged and redistributed. These long-distance exchanges sustained the prosperity of the major political entities that successively emerged in the Sahel (Grégoire et al., 1997: pp. 122-123).

Beyond the main trans-Saharan routes, other routes connected the Sahel with

the forests of the south. Merchants exchanged salt, natron, iron, textiles, and craft products for kola nuts. Hausa networks extended particularly toward the *Gonga* and *Ashanti* regions, which were rich in kola, thereby contributing to the development of trading centers such as *Salaga*, *Bobo-Dioulasso*, *Kong*, *Bouna*, and *Bondoukou*. According to Grégoire et al. (1997: p. 122), these markets constituted a vital interface between the Sahel and the coastal regions. Gold deposits also occupied a particularly important position in these exchanges.

Kiéthéga (1983: pp. 45-47) highlights the decisive role played by various communities, particularly the *Jula* and *Wangara*, who were specialists in the collection and transportation of gold from forest regions. This gold, extracted through artisanal mining in *Bambouk*, *Bouré*, and along the *Mouhoun* (formerly the Black Volta), passed through Sahelian markets before reaching North Africa via *Timbuktu* and the caravan routes. Gold deposits constituted a vital resource for the Sahelian kingdoms. Delafosse (1922: pp. 42-43) explains how the *Ghana* Empire extended its influence as far as the mines of *Bambouk* and the *Falémé*. The gold extracted there supplied both royal treasuries and trade with caravans arriving from *Tafilalet* and the *Drâa*.

Located farther south, at the interface between the Sahel and the Sudanian savanna, the *Moogo* did not initially occupy a central position within this system. It subsequently became a dynamic southern outlet, crossed by caravans carrying salt from the Sahara and returning laden with gold, kola nuts, and enslaved people. Unlike other Sahelian areas, the earliest contacts between the *Moogo* and the Arab-Muslim world were not initially motivated by religious considerations. Rather, these exchanges began for another reason: gold.

The *Moogo* kingdoms played a strategic role that deserves particular emphasis. They took advantage of their position as an interface between the agricultural regions of the south and the commercial routes of the north. Their military expeditions toward the north were not merely raids. These incursions represented, in the reading offered here, a deliberate strategy to integrate the *Moogo* into Sahelian networks and secure key commercial resources horses, salt, and luxury goods that were essential to the durability of royal authority and the development of trade. No contemporary source states this intent explicitly. The characterization of these expeditions as a deliberate strategy is this study's inference from their recurrence and their consistent economic outcomes, not a documented statement of royal policy.

Thus, relations between the *Moogo* and Arab-Muslim spaces were based on strong economic complementarity. The *Moogo* kingdoms primarily exported agricultural products, livestock, captives taken during precolonial warfare, kola nuts originating from southern regions, as well as various artisanal products. In return, caravans brought into the *Moogo* salt extracted from Saharan mines, horses intended for warrior elites, textiles imported from North Africa, weapons, metal objects, and luxury goods destined for royal courts (Izard, 1985: pp. 103-105).

The *Moogo* kingdoms thus gradually exploited their position as a crossroads to

establish themselves within trans-Saharan trade. Their success depended in particular on the expertise of the *Yarse* and, later, that of the *Marânse* and *Zāngoeto*, who contributed to the establishment of several markets within the *Moogo*.

Overall, the Islamization that accompanied this trade took place largely through peaceful and gradual processes. In this regard, Triaud observes:

“Halfway between the sources of Sudanese gold, Islam appeared and developed in the wake of Arab and Berber merchants and conquerors. The major routes through which Islam penetrated West Africa were the routes of trans-Saharan trade: a western route through *Sijilmâsa* and *Awdaghast* (*Aoudaghost*), a central route through *Tādmakka*, and an eastern route through the *Fezzan* and *Kāwâr*” (Triaud, 1973: p. 1).

In the *Moogo*, Islamization therefore proceeded gradually, initially through merchant elites and local authorities before spreading to wider segments of society. This process was largely carried out by *Yarse*, *Marânse*, *Zāngoeto*, and *Wangara* merchants, who disseminated their faith as they traveled, without resorting to military coercion. This mode of diffusion, which Jean-Louis Triaud identified as the most common form of the early Islamization of Sudanic societies, reflects an essentially peaceful process of religious implantation (Triaud, 1973). It should be noted that the “peaceful” character of this diffusion is documented directly only for the absence of recorded military coercion by merchant intermediaries; the broader claim that Islamization was uniformly non-violent throughout the *Moogo* remains an interpretive extrapolation from this narrower, better-attested pattern.

I. Cissé confirms this specifically in the case of the *Moogo*, identifying several social groups—*Dioula*, *Marka*, *Yarse*, and *Marânse*, and, to a lesser extent, Fulani pastoralists—as historical actors who facilitated the commercial diffusion of Islam throughout this region (Cissé, 2014: pp. 12-15).

In his seminal study of Islam, R. Otayek emphasizes the political consequences of this mode of penetration in the territory that would later become Burkina Faso. According to him, specific socio-historical conditions confined Islam to a position of social marginality and political subordination, whereas elsewhere in the surrounding regions, theocratic states were being established whose legitimacy was founded upon the Qur’an (Otayek, 1996: p. 233).

The *Moogo* benefited, in this respect, from its strategic geographical position at the crossroads between the Akan goldfields of the southwest and the caravan outlets of the Sahel. Resistant to the conquering form of Islam associated with successive religious wars, the *Moogo* nevertheless displayed considerable tolerance toward the commercial Islam introduced by *Jula*, *Yarse*, *Marânse*, and *Zāngoeto* merchants. The *Moaaga* authorities allowed these merchants to settle and prosper in return for their respect for the traditional order and their allegiance to the *Nanambse*, the legitimate holders of *Pānga*, that is, force or political authority (Otayek, 1996: pp. 233-235).

Trade, however, was only the first channel of interaction. For Islam to become

firmly rooted in *Moaaga* social structures, specific social groups had to emerge that were capable of embodying and transmitting religious practices within the *Moogo* itself. This was the role primarily played by several cultural and social intermediaries.

3.2. Intermediary Groups as Vectors of Exchange

Intermediary groups played a decisive role in structuring relations between the *Moogo* and the Arab muslim world. Contrary to the notion that the spread of Islam was driven exclusively by conquest or by the preaching activities of major religious centers, exchanges within the *Moose* kingdoms relied primarily on specialized communities that served as bridges between Sahelian societies and customary authorities. The *Yarse*, *Fulbe*, *Zāngoeto*, and *Marānse* served as the primary vectors of this economic, cultural, and religious mediation.

3.2.1. The *Yarga* Diaspora as the Foundation of a Commercial and Matrimonial Islam

Within *Moaaga* society, the *Yarse* constituted the community that most systematically mediated between the *Moogo* and the Arab-Muslim world. Michel Izard's foundational studies demonstrated that the *Yarse* operated as a specialised mercantile group integrated into *Moose* societies over several centuries, facilitating the flow of commodities between local markets and trans-Saharan trade routes (Izard, 1971: pp. 214-227). Notably, they contributed to the establishment of one of the earliest markets in the *Moogo*, located at *La*, during the reign of *Moognaaba Nasbiire*.

Within the *Moogo*, these markets, like others, were also places where technological innovations, social practices, and cultural norms were disseminated. They facilitated the emergence of new languages of communication and commercial practices inspired by Muslim traditions. The regular presence of *Yarse* merchants from *Mande* hubs (such as *Djenné* and *Timbuktu*) also facilitated diplomatic and political information sharing. Markets thus became key arenas for transmitting regional news, forging commercial alliances, and monitoring religious developments across the Sahel (Ouibga, 2026: p. 451).

This specialization extended into the administrative and diplomatic sphere. The *Yarse* also contributed to the dissemination of accounting practices, the use of Arabic script in certain commercial transactions, and the development of diplomatic relations with Muslim centers in the Sahel.

Their command of regional languages of communication and their knowledge of caravan routes made them indispensable intermediaries between *Moose* rulers and merchants arriving from *Djenné*, *Timbuktu*, or *Kano*. Their mastery of regional lingua francas and caravan routes enabled them to serve as essential intermediaries between *Moose* rulers and merchants from major commercial centers.

A. Kouanda devoted a substantial part of his scholarly work to the *Yarse*. He argues that the *Yarse* combined three major functions: a commercial function as

intermediaries in large-scale caravan trade; a religious function as custodians of Qur'anic knowledge in *Moaaga* lands; and a function of cultural legitimation, whereby their status as integrated Muslim outsiders translated into a broadly recognized position within the social architecture of the kingdom (Kouanda, 1984: pp. 107-108, 192-195).

This integration was by no means a one-way process of conversion from above or below. Kouanda highlights a reciprocal process of integration, which he terms *yarsification*, which he refers to as “*yarsification*.” Certain *Moose* individuals chose, for socioeconomic advantages, to align with *Yarse* identity, adopting patronyms such as *Bikiēnga*, *Soore*, *Rāabo*, *Giira*, *Kanazoe*, and *Sinōn* (Kouanda, 1984: pp. 84-87).

In a seminal 1989 contribution, A. Kouanda examined whether *Yarse* Muslim religious practice functioned primarily as a factor of integration into *Moaaga* society or as a means of maintaining a distinct ethnic identity. His answer was nuanced: *Yarse* religious practice served both purposes simultaneously. It contributed to their economic and social integration while preserving a distinct cultural identity through the intergenerational transmission of Qur'anic knowledge (Kouanda, 1984: pp. 86-87).

Recognizing the economic benefits of long-distance trade within, *Moose* rulers encouraged *Yarse* settlement by granting land, offering credit, and facilitating martial alliances (Ouibga, 2026: pp. 566-568). The *Nanambse* needed specialists in long-distance trade in order to open up their kingdoms to wider commercial networks and derive greater benefits from these exchanges while maintaining a degree of control over them. The merchants, for their part, needed access to a broad market where they could operate with limited taxation and substantial security guarantees.

The *Yarse* thus contributed fundamentally to the development of economic activities and exchanges with societies located beyond the *Moogo*. This explains why they were repeatedly welcomed by the *Nanambse*, who expected to increase their fiscal revenues through the taxes and duties generated by the merchants' economic activities (Ouibga, 2026: p. 451).

In sum, the *Yarse* are widely recognized as pioneers of Islamization in the *Moogo*. According to Simporté (2005: p. 630), it was through their presence that Islam began to spread within the *Moogo*. Their dynamism enabled Islam to gain ground, sometimes at the expense of local beliefs, in chiefdoms such as *Yaako*, *Sāamba*, and *Kōnkiistēnga*, where they exercised considerable influence within various structures of political authority.

The *Moaaga* royal power therefore made strategic use of this religious dynamic. From the eighteenth century onward, some *Moose* rulers began converting individually to Islam, primarily for pragmatic reasons. The objective was to strengthen social cohesion within the kingdom by consolidating the loyalty of Islamized groups, most of whom were *Yarse*, toward the *Moognaaba* (Otayek, 1996: pp. 234-235).

After a long period of resistance, the *Moognaaba* himself eventually converted to Islam on a personal basis, a decision that was subsequently followed by members of his court and entourage. Paradoxically, Islam thus became an instrument for consolidating customary authority rather than a factor in its weakening.

Gradually, the religion that the *Yarse* had helped introduce acquired an almost official status, particularly during the reign of *Naaba Rulgu*, who appointed an imam to guide the emerging Muslim community (Ouibga, 2026: pp. 447-475). The imam represented the Muslim faithful. The long-standing presence of the *Yarse*, their relatively tolerant practice of Islam, and their adoption of *Moore* as their everyday language eventually convinced *Moognaaba Naaba Rulgu* to entrust them with the position of chief imam and leadership of the Muslim community (Kouanda, 1984: pp. 163-164).

The example set by *Naaba Rulgu* was soon followed elsewhere. Other *Nanambse* incorporated *Yarse* into their inner circles and assigned them religious responsibilities.

Across the *Moogo*, numerous chiefs gradually converted to Islam and sent their children to Qur'anic schools to learn Arabic, which was then a privileged language of international exchange. Kouanda (1984: pp. 161-162) notes that this was the case for the *Moognanamse Sawoadgo* (1825, 1842), *Kutu* (1854-1871), and *Wobgo* (1891-1897), who received instruction in Islam through these institutions.

These developments also contributed to the dissemination of circumcision and female circumcision within the *Moogo*. At the same time, this approach sought to involve the Muslim community in the administration of traditional political authority. The position of *Yarnaaba* (chief of the *Yarse*), appointed by each ruler, illustrates their growing involvement in political affairs. This office is directly attested in the sources cited; the stronger claim that the *Yarse* thereby altered *Moaaga* institutional structures, rather than being absorbed into an unchanged customary hierarchy, remains this study's interpretation of that evidence.

The trajectory of the *Yarse* differed significantly from that of the *Fulbe*, another Muslim component of *Moaaga* society. The latter remained dispersed within the host society and did not benefit from the same degree of institutional openness and integration that characterized the experience of the *Yarse*.

3.2.2. The *Fulbe*: Pastoral Mobility and Religious Mediation

The *Fulbe* played a distinct yet crucial role in bridging the *Moogo* with the Muslim world. Their transhumance lifestyle connected ecological zones between the Sahel and Sudanian savanna, facilitating the movement of people, ideas, and religious practices. Integrated into West African commercial and intellectual networks, their seasonal migrations enabled the dissemination of legal concepts and Qur'anic teachings, while maintaining ties with major Islamic scholarly centers across the Sahel.

However, their presence in the *Moogo* extended beyond spiritual function. Oral traditions and anthropological studies reveal shifting relations with *Moose* au-

thorities depending on the period and locality. While some pastoral communities forged strategic alliances with local political powers, others experienced tensions over access to grazing lands and water sources. This variability highlights that cultural transmission was neither uniform nor static; rather, it was continuously negotiated within local political frameworks.

The *Fulbe* exerted a significant influence on the political and religious organization of the *Moose* kingdoms, particularly through the gradual diffusion of Islam. A notable example is found in Kōnkiistenga, where *Naaba Kōnkiss* incorporated a Fulani herder into his inner circle during his expansion into the *Moogo*. Appointed *Siilminaaba*—chief of the *Fulbe* under his authority—was entrusted with overseeing the royal herd, known as *Kiims-baagr*, or the “herd of the ancestors.” These animals were reserved for sacrifices in honoring ancestral spirits; each successive ruler inherited the herd, thereby perpetuating a core political and ritual tradition (Ouibga, 2026: p. 231).

Elsewhere, the *Fulbe* participated in the establishment of chiefdoms, such as *Barkounda*, while simultaneously fostering Islamic practices. The *Barry* lineage is widely recognised as key actors in the establishment of Fulani settlements within the *Moogo*. Their settlement at *Niv*, for instance, was facilitated through local alliances and a gradual process of social integration initiated largely by the *Barry* themselves (Ouibga, 2026: p. 231).

Following these early *Fulbe* settlements, the *Zāngoeto* entered the *Moogo*, driven by the combination of commercial and religious activities.

3.2.3. The *Zāngoeto* and *Marānse* as Actors in Regional Exchange Networks

The *Zāngoeto* (*Hausa*) and the *Marānse* (*Songhai*) are less extensively represented in the historical literature, yet their role in organizing regional trade appears to have been fundamental. Several oral accounts from central and western Burkina Faso portray them as merchant groups engaged in transporting goods between local markets and Sahelian trading centers (Ouibga, 2026: pp. 455-467). Their extensive knowledge of trade routes and commercial practices enabled them not only to distribute their goods but also to transmit technical know-how and cultural influences. They traded textiles, salt, horses, metal objects, and other artisanal products originating from Muslim regions. Through these activities, they also indirectly contributed to the diffusion of certain forms of religious practice and linguistic influences. Markets were indeed key meeting points where material goods, political information, technical knowledge, and cultural references intersected.

The *Zāngoeto* served as a bridge between the *Moose* kingdoms and Muslim merchants arriving from the northern regions. Their influence was pivotal in the expanding trans-Saharan trade, dissemination Islamic practices and the introducing advanced artisanal techniques. Some of them even became notable figures or advisers within royal courts, where their expertise was highly valued. They maintained diverse relationships with local communities and were integrated into *Moose*

royal courts as influential figures. This was the case in *Waogdgo* and in its subordinate chiefdoms, such as *Nobre* in southern *Moogo* and *Lale* (*Kvdgo*) in western *Moogo*. Their presence is documented in arbitration processes and ritual ceremonies. Their establishment in *Lale* underscores the well-established hierarchical linkage between *Waogdgo* and its subordinate chiefdoms (Ouibga, 2026: pp. 455-467).

Their arrival also contributed to the development of forms of religious syncretism. Although they disseminated Islam, many continued to observe animist agricultural rites. For example, the *Zāngoeto* of *Kvdgo* were responsible for safeguarding the sacred altar of the *Zoma*, where annual sacrifices were performed on an altar-stone located beside the mosque built by their ancestor *Guelo*. Such practices contributed to the spread of a Sufi-oriented form of Islam, marked by the development of the *Tijaniyya* and *Qadiriyya* traditions among Hausa Muslims, which became intertwined with *Moose* traditions. Some initiated *Zāngoeto* also practiced sand divination, in a manner comparable to that of the *Bagba* among the *Yōnyōse* (Ouibga, 2026: pp. 455-467).

The arrival of the *Zāngoeto* in the *Moogo*, a region previously dominated economically and religiously by the *Yarse*, introduced a dynamic commercial rivalry. To distinguish themselves, the *Zāngoeto* notably introduced *Karfo* and *Nufa*, ceremonial garments reserved for the aristocracy. *Moognaaba Karfo* reportedly derived his regnal name (*Zab-yvure*) from this practice, which also gave its name to the *Zāngoetē* quarter, located east of the royal palace in *Waogdgo* (Ouibga, 2026: p. 467). This quarter no longer exists, having been demolished as a result of urban development.

According to Kouanda (1984: p. 224), in an effort to compete with and eventually surpass the *Yarse*, the *Zangoeto* (*Hausa*) specialized in the sale of women's ornaments and the hides of wild animals, including buffaloes, lions, leopards, hyenas, and elephants. These hides were used in traditional pharmacopoeia to treat childhood illnesses such as measles, smallpox, chickenpox, and whooping cough.

What about the *Marānse*?

The *Marānse* also benefited from protected trade networks, established under the patronage of the *Moose* rulers, who created secure trade corridors by establishing chiefdoms along the main *Marānse* trade routes. Beyond trade, Islam played a decisive role in their permanent settlement within the *Moose* kingdom. As Kouanda emphasizes in his analysis, the *Marānse* were:

“Muslim foreigners who were integrated and who use *Moore* as their language, the *Marānse* were undoubtedly among the first to settle in the *Moogo*. However, the collective *Moaga* consciousness did not primarily retain their religious difference, but rather their professional specialization. For the *Moose*, the *Marānse* were artisans, particularly dyers” (Kouanda, 1984: p. 102).

Like the *Yarse* and the *Zangoeto*, the *Marānse* specialized in the caravan trade in salt, as well as in weaving and dyeing. Beyond reshaping the socioeconomic landscape, these trade and religious mediation left indelible linguistic and onomastic

imprints across Moose society.

3.3. Linguistic and Onomastic Borrowings

As Triaud (1973: p. 2) argues, Islam introduced literacy and shared language, fostering bureaucratic developments across Sudanic states. In the *Moogo*, the most pervasive yet subtle legacy of Arab-Muslim presence is linguistic. *Moore*, the language of the *Moose*, absorbs a substantial corpus of religious vocabulary of Arabic origin.

For example, the very term used for “mosque” in *Moore*, *misri*, derives directly from the Arabic *masjid*, as A. Ouédraogo mentioned in his study of the mosques of *Waogdgo* (Ouédraogo, 2007: p. 6). Other terms used in *Moore*—such as *Barka*, *Zāngo*, *Foura Fura*, *Maasa*, *Kura-kura* / *Kuli-kuli*, and *Gaonre* / *Gauraye*, referring respectively to “thank you,” “stopover,” “a ball of *akassa*,” “a pancake,” “a groundnut-cake pastry,” and “a mixture of leaves and cereals cooked together”—appear to follow the same process of linguistic borrowing. These terms were introduced through the same commercial networks that facilitated the circulation of gold, salt, and kola nuts.

Onomastics constitutes a second important field of observation. Personal names of Arab-Muslim origin, such as *Ibrahima*, *Idrissa*, *Moussa*, *Salamata*, and *Fatimata*, spread widely among *Moose* families well beyond Yarse and *Zangoeto* communities. This diffusion underscores a degree of cultural permeability aligned with the process of “*yarsification*” discussed earlier.

A parallel onomastic dynamic occurred among the *Marka* of the Black Volta Bend, where Islamization—including the militant movement associated with El Hadj Mamadou Karantao’s religious war reshaped local naming practices.

These linguistic and onomastic borrowings find their most visible expression in the built environment of contemporary Burkina Faso, particularly in the development of religious earthen architecture, to which attention must now turn.

3.4. Architectural and Urban Imprints

Unlike royal palaces, which remained physical manifestations of the *Naam*, mosques primarily served the needs of urban Muslim communities. They reflected the expanding influence of commercial and spiritual exchanges rather than an attempt to impose a new political order.

Among the tangible legacies of Arab-Muslim presence, none is more evident today than the religious earthen architecture associated with the Sudano-Sahelian style. As Triaud observes:

“Islam [...] introduced the Sudanic countries into the Mediterranean world, bringing them new techniques (architecture, cotton cultivation and weaving, leather and metalworking, etc.), new plants (wheat, sugarcane, Asian rice, etc.), and educating and training elites, but it also destroyed ancient African cultural, artistic, and social traditions” (Triaud, 1973: p. 2).

This architectural tradition, characterized by *banco* (puddled earth/above) and

minarets reinforced with projecting wood as scaffolding, dominated early Islamic structures in the *Moogo*. Crucially, *banco* had long been the building material of traditional *Moose* domestic architecture prior to the advent of Islam (Ouédraogo, 2007: p. 22).

Simporé provides detailed information on the preparation of the clay used in mosque construction:

“Extracted from a *tan naoko* or from the banks of a seasonal stream, clay is the principal material used for the walls. Mixed with chopped straw or cereal husks, it is used to make earthen rolls or bricks; combined with cow dung, horse manure, or shea butter, it becomes plastering clay [...] Clay is also used as mortar to bind the bricks together. In this case, it is not mixed with straw” (Simporé, 2005: p. 236).

In *Waogdgo*, the first mosque, known as the *Bagyan Yarse* Mosque or the Railway Mosque, was erected during the reign of *Moognaaba Rulgu* (1796-1825), the first Muslim ruler of the lineage. According to Simporé (2005: p. 417), it was constructed under the leadership of chief Imam Mustapha Bagyan, son of Sorio, a close confidant of *Naaba Rulgu*. Another account, reported by Ouédraogo, likewise attributes its construction to the *Yarse* during the same reign.

The structure, now largely destroyed by urban expansion, featured an interior floor area of approximately 52 square meters, within a 144 square meter enclosure (Ouédraogo, 2007: pp. 3-27). Simporé provides a more precise description. According to him, the structure can be broadly associated with the Sudanese architectural style. It measured roughly 7.90 meters in length by 7.10 meters in width. It had two separate entrances: one on the northern side, reserved for the imam, and another on the southern side, intended for the general public. The main structure stood 4 meters high, with a surrounding enclosure wall between 1.5 and 2 meters tall depending on the location (Simporé, 2005: pp. 418-419).

The Railway Mosque was built primarily of *banco*, humus-free clay mixed with water and straw (*Loudetia togoensis*), kneaded into molded bricks. This material was first used to produce molded bricks and subsequently to make the mortar joints. Once dried, the bricks were arranged in two parallel walls. At the desired height, the bricks of the outer wall were inclined, creating a decorative pattern of small isosceles triangles.

Both the walls and the enclosure were plastered on both sides. The clay used for plastering differed from that used for the bricks: it contained termite-mound clay, cow dung, and residues from shea-butter production. After application, the plaster was carefully smoothed. Interestingly, the plaster has survived the passage of time better than the bricks themselves. Where the plaster has detached, the underlying bricks have suffered considerable deterioration.

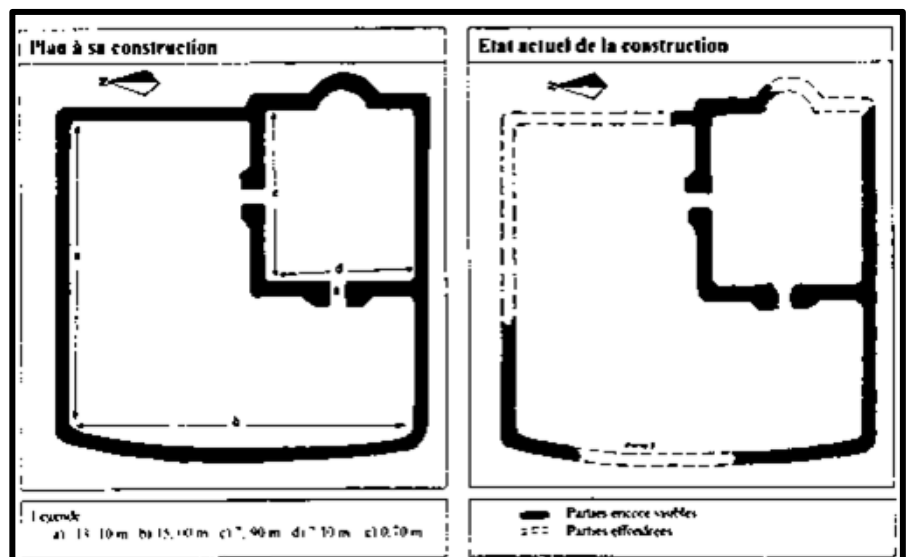
In addition to clay, wood was extensively used, particularly for the roof, which has since collapsed and may have resembled the roof of *Yonryida*. Wooden beams also served as scaffolding for constructing projecting elements, including the roof parapet and the minaret (Simporé, 2005: pp. 420-424).

The following illustrations provide an overview of this architectural infrastructure.



Source: Simporé (2005: p. 419).

Photo. The railway mosque: view of the building and the courtyard.



Source: Simporé (2005: p. 421).

Design. Plan of the first mosque in Ouagadougou.

Categories of Mosques and the Diffusion of Sudano-Sahelian Architecture:

Furthermore, the same author identifies several categories of mosques. Among them are places that are not, strictly speaking, constructed buildings. Rather, they are simply designated spaces, often located near markets, in clearings, or on threshing grounds where millet is processed. These sites are reserved for major communal prayers.

The second category comprises the *Zaawiya*, a family mosque; the *Sak-misri*, a neighborhood mosque; and finally the *Mis-kasanga*, which refers to the main mosque, also known as the *Arzum-misri*, or Friday mosque (Simporé, 2005: p. 410).

The present-day Great Mosque of *Waogdgo* exemplifies this architectural evo-

lution, having undergone initial construction in 1952, major expansion between 1973 and 1979, and successive renovations from 2005 onward (Ouédraogo, 2007: p. 22).

The historiography of Sudano-Sahelian architecture has long debated the origins of these monumental earthen techniques. Aradeon plays a key role in this discussion. According to tradition, it was the Andalusian architect *Abou Ishaq es-Sahéli*, brought back by the *Mali* emperor *Kankou Moussa* from his pilgrimage to Mecca, who introduced monumental Sudano-Sahelian earthen architecture. However, Susan B. Aradeon demonstrates that this attribution is largely legendary. Indeed, examples of monumental earthen architecture existed in the region well before the fourteenth century, thereby challenging the notion that this architectural style was introduced at that particular time.

Nevertheless, the pilgrimage to Mecca undoubtedly functioned as a crucial conduit for technical and aesthetic exchange with North African building traditions, enriching a broad regional tradition of adobe construction documented across the *Moogo* and the wider Sahelian belt (Bourgeois et al., 1989).

UNESCO further recognized the Outstanding Universal Value of this architectural tradition in 2021 by inscribing eight mosques of this type located in northern Côte d'Ivoire, neighboring Burkina Faso, on the World Heritage List. According to UNESCO, this architectural tradition originated in *Djenné* between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries and spread southward from the fifteenth century onward through the same merchant and scholarly networks that contributed to the spread of Islam as far as the *Moogo* (UNESCO, 2021).

Furthermore, the expansion of Sudanic architecture stimulated the mobility of specialized guilds. Itinerant masons, blacksmiths, carpenters, and master builders traveled across Sahelian urban centers, introducing refined building techniques adapted to the climatic realities of the *Moogo*.

The materials used in construction did not undergo any radical transformation. Earthen construction remained the principal building technique throughout the *Moose* kingdoms. Wood, plant fibers, and locally available stone also continued to be widely used. Arab-Muslim influences mainly affected construction and assembly techniques, certain decorative forms, building-maintenance practices, and the spatial organization of some religious structures.

Contacts with Muslim regions also encouraged the diffusion of new decorative elements. Some historic mosques in Burkina Faso display features characteristic of Sahelian architecture, including vertical buttresses, projecting pillars, small openings, interior layouts oriented toward the *qibla*, and the presence of a *mihrab*.

By contrast, *Moose* royal palaces retained their distinctive architectural integrity. Ceremonial plazas, inner courtyards, and royal residential compounds continued to reflect the specific ritual and political imperatives of the *Naam*. This divergence illustrates that Arab Muslim aesthetic influences remained largely confined to spaces built for Muslim communities, without altering the physical architecture or symbolic expression of *Moose* political authority.

3.5. Islam and *Moaaga* Political Authority: A Grafted Tradition under Political Control

A primary finding of this study is that the spread of Islam across *Moogo* resulted neither from military conquest nor from the mass conversion of political elites, but rather from a gradual process of cultural, economic, and religious accommodation. This dynamic clearly distinguishes the *Moose* kingdoms from several neighboring Sudan polities where Islam progressively became the foundation matrix of state legitimacy. In the *Moogo*, customary institutions remained the primary framework of political governance, even as Islamic practices took firm root within specific social strata.

The defining feature of the *Moaaga* historical trajectory is not the absence of Islam, but the structural subordination to customary authority. Otayek summarizes this configuration by showing that the political space of the former Volta region, and subsequently of Burkina Faso, was organized around the *Moose* kingdoms, which succeeded in preserving both their territorial integrity and their institutions in the face of a regional environment characterized by continual sociopolitical upheavals. The “Islam of the sword” repeatedly challenged them, but without success (Otayek, 1996: pp. 234-235).

Thus, unlike the theocratic states that emerged in certain parts of the Western Sudan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Moose* kingdoms maintained a clear demarcation between political and religious authority. The power of the *Nanambse* continued to rest on the principles of the *Naam*, understood as a system of rules governing succession, dynastic legitimacy, and relations with custodians of the land.

The empirical evidence is unambiguous: The *Moogo* did not develop an administration based on Islamic law (*Sharia*). Political institutions continued to function according to customary rules transmitted through royal lineages and territorial authorities. At the same time, according to Ouibga (2026: pp. 444-448), the *Moose* kingdoms distinguished themselves through their hospitality toward foreign merchants, the protection of economic activities, respect for the religious freedom of Muslim communities, the preservation of the political supremacy of the *Naam*, and the maintenance of customary institutions.

The most influential merchants, scholars, and Arabic-speaking literati frequently served as interpreters in relations with commercial partners from the Sahel and, later, from Europe. Their command of several languages facilitated the conclusion of commercial agreements as well as diplomatic exchanges.

Two attempts at religious wars, however, sought to challenge this configuration in the western margins of the *Moogo*. The first was led by Mahamoudou Karantao, who established a Muslim kingdom around *Wahabou* around 1840. The second was led by Amadou Deme, known as Alkari of *Bossé*, who launched a war of conversion in 1887 against the *Ko*, *Bwaba*, and *San* (*Samo*) populations. These episodes are documented by Koala (2025: pp. 188-196) in his study of *religious war*. Neither attempt succeeded in extending its influence into the heart of central *Moogo*, whose

political core remained beyond the reach of conquering Islam.

Over the long term, the resistance of *Moose* political centers contributed to the emergence of an Islam adapted to the local context, as well as to a confessional geography characterized by differences that continue to influence contemporary Burkina Faso. Within the *Moogo*, individual conversions were often accompanied by the retention of certain customary practices, particularly during family ceremonies, agricultural rituals, and interactions with traditional authorities.

According to Otayek, however, an initial line of division distinguishes Muslim *Moose* from non-Muslims, particularly in western regions, including the *Jula*, *Bobo-Jula*, and *Fulbe*, who were predominantly affiliated with the *Tijaniyya* brotherhood associated with El-Hadj Omar. At the same time, Muslim communities in the central *Moose* regions increasingly turned toward the *Qadiriyya*, while the north witnessed the establishment of the *Hamalliyya*, reflecting the reformist orientation that emerged from the nineteenth-century religious wars. This diversity of Sufi affiliations intersected with a persistent distrust among western Muslims toward the centralizing tendencies of the *Moose* elites of *Waogdgo*, whom they regarded as practitioners of a “superficial” form of Islam characteristic of “uncultivated” people (Otayek, 1996: p. 236).

In light of the foregoing, it is necessary to draw a clear distinction between social Islamization and political Islamization. Although Muslim practices expanded steadily through commercial networks and scholarly circles, they did not fundamentally alter the principles underlying *Moaaga* political organization. This distinction is arguably one of the major historical specificities of the *Moogo*.

Whereas many Sahelian states gradually made Islam the basis of their political legitimacy, the *Moose* kingdoms maintained, until the colonial period, a political system autonomous from Muslim authorities. This situation calls for an interpretation based on the concept of managed political integration.

The *Moose* rulers did not seek to obstruct the spread of Islam; rather, they regulated it in ways that made it compatible with the principles of the *Naam*. This approach enabled Muslim communities to become progressively established while ensuring the continuity of customary institutions. The religious transformations observed were therefore the outcome of an ongoing negotiation between openness to Sahelian influences and the preservation of the local political order. They demonstrate the capacity of *Moose* societies to incorporate profound changes without abandoning the foundations of their institutional organization.

However, this policy of accommodation had significant consequences for *Moaaga* culture.

The first cost was borne by the Muslim community itself. Rather than eliminating religious disputes, the subordination of Islam to the authority of the *Nanambse* merely displaced these conflicts within the local *Ummah*. Kouanda documents, in his analysis, the disputes that affected the Muslim community between 1926 and 1986. These resulted from recurrent struggles for control over the royal imamate of *Waogdgo*, pitting *Yarse* lineages, traditionally regarded as custodians of Qur’anic

knowledge, against recently converted *Moose* lineages that enjoyed closer ties to the palace.

This was evidence that religious authority ultimately remained under customary supervision. During certain succession crises involving the imamate, the imam's distinctive insignia slippers, staff, and turban were returned to the palace of the *Moognaaba* (Kouanda, 1998: p. 83).

Thus, while *Moaaga* political authority gained increasing stability over time, part of the Muslim community paid the price in the form of internal instability. The same dynamic subsequently affected the postcolonial state. Otayek demonstrates that, after independence, the Burkinabè state likewise cultivated internal divisions within the religious sphere as an instrument of political control (Otayek, 1996: pp. 105-117).

The second cost was demographic. By allowing Islam to spread throughout society and the economy, in its various forms, provided that it did not threaten their authority in the country, the *Nanambse* unintentionally paved the way for the relative decline of ancestral religion in their territories.

In 2019, for example, the national census recorded only 9% of the population as adhering to traditional religions, in a Burkina Faso where Muslims accounted for 63.8% of the population (Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie, 2019: p. 47). Ancestral *Moose* religious traditions are therefore now a minority, whereas two centuries earlier they constituted the sole religious foundation of the *Moogo*. Political accommodation thus came at a cultural cost: it preserved the *Naam*, but not the religious supremacy of ancestral beliefs among the *Moose*.

The third cost is more recent. The poorly regulated pluralism that for centuries facilitated coexistence between Islam and traditional structures now exposes the country to new vulnerabilities. The absence of institutional safeguards established at an earlier stage has facilitated the penetration of extremist religious currents, particularly from neighboring Sahelian areas, whose logic of identity-based confrontation differs from the historical balances that they regard as obsolete (International Crisis Group, 2016: Sections II.C and III).

Thus, what was long regarded as a strength—namely, the absence of rigid boundaries between the religious and political spheres—has become a weakness in the current security context, as the mechanisms that once regulated this coexistence have proven increasingly difficult to contain.

Ultimately, this precolonial balance, based on the negotiated subordination of Islam to customary authority, was not destroyed by the arrival of colonial rule. It did not disappear; rather, it was transformed, to the point that, at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it underwent a profound change in scale.

3.6. Colonial and Contemporary Reconfigurations

Contrary to traditional assumptions, French colonial expansion did not spread Islam in the *Moogo*. On the contrary, it paradoxically contributed to accelerating it. By disrupting traditional social and political hierarchies, colonial rule created a

state of profound sociopolitical uncertainty. In the face of this structural upheaval, Islam offered a stable normative reference and a unifying framework that transcended lineage and ethnic divisions through its universalising message.

Nevertheless, despite Islam growing social presence, the transformation of the established order was far from immediate. For much of the colonial era, Islam remained a politically and socially marginalized spiritual force, serving primarily as a mechanism for collective orientation amidst rapid societal change (Otayek, 1996: p. 235).

As synthesised by the International Crisis Group, this religion, which for a long time had no political vocation of its own, remained subject to what can be described as a “triple domination”: first, that of customary authority; second, that of colonial rule; and third, that of Catholicism, particularly through the decisive activities of Father Joanny Thévenoud (International Crisis Group, 2016: Section II.A).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the demographic expansion of Islam culminated in Burkina Faso in a profound institutional and demographic reconfiguration. According to the 2019 General Population and Housing Census (*Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitat*, RGPH), Muslims represented 63.8% of the national population, compared to 20.1% Catholics, 9% adhering to traditional religions, and 6.2% Protestants (Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie, 2019: p. 47).

These statistical figures must nonetheless be interpreted with analytical nuance, given the extent of religious mobility, the persistence of syncretic practices, and the continued coexistence of formal religious affiliation with traditional beliefs and practices. This demographic shift reflects fundamental transformation; Islam has become the statistically dominant religion in the country.

However, this numerical predominance has not translated into the capture of political power by institutional Islam, in accordance with the historical pattern outlined above.

The International Crisis Group report echoes other studies on the Burkinabè model of religious coexistence, which had persisted for approximately six decades but came under increasing strain from the mid-2010s onward. These studies highlight several persistent challenges: a significant gap between the demographic weight of Muslims and their underrepresentation among political and administrative elites; difficulties in modernizing Franco-Arabic education; and, above all, a regional environment destabilized by the growing influence of rigorist forms of Islam and by violence perpetrated in the name of religion in neighboring Sahelian countries (International Crisis Group, 2016: Sections II.C and III).

This demographic growth has unfolded alongside a fundamental transformation in how religious knowledge itself is produced. To conclude this overview of the findings, it is therefore necessary to examine these developments more closely.

3.7. Linguistic, Intellectual, and Educational Transformations

The final dimension of this long-term historical process concerns education. The

establishment of Qur'anic schools constituted one of the earliest instruments for the enduring dissemination of Islam. Qur'anic teachers gradually formed a literate elite proficient in Arabic, capable of reading and writing the Qur'an and engaging in certain fields of Islamic jurisprudence.

One of the most significant transformations was the widespread adoption of written Arabic. Its earliest users were primarily Muslim merchants and Qur'anic teachers, who employed it for correspondence, commercial bookkeeping, the copying of religious texts, and the production of educational materials. Arabic script played a critical role in the formation of intellectual networks in West Africa and within the *Moogo*, enabling African scholars to participate in the circulation of knowledge far beyond the boundaries of individual city-states. Historically, as A. Ouédraogo (2007) has shown for the twentieth-century era, Qur'anic education was acquired through a lineage-based system centered on the teacher, his sons, and his pupils. This system was gradually challenged and subsequently complemented by a new institutional model: the *madrassa*, or Franco-Arab school, where religious instruction in Arabic was combined with general education (Ouédraogo, 1996).

Today, Burkina Faso counts more than 2,465 Franco-Arab schools, and approximately 400 post-primary educational institutions. These establishments constitute a significant pillar of the national education systems. They account for more than half of the private education sector and reportedly enroll between 15% and 20% of Burkinabè pupils and students (Direction Générale des Études et des Statistiques Sectorielles, 2025: pp. 248-250).

This transition from a lineage-bound pedagogical model to an institutionalised educational system has fundamentally altered the sociology of religious leadership in Burkina Faso. However, it has also created challenges for graduates of these institutions in terms of professional integration, as their qualifications and skills remain insufficiently recognized by both the state and the labor market (International Crisis Group, 2016: Section III.B.3).

From a religious perspective, this process was accompanied, from the 1970s onward, by the emergence of a reformist movement inspired by Wahhabism, which Cissé studied under the designation of the Sunnite Movement of Burkina Faso. Relations between this movement and the dominant Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the *Tijaniyya* and *Qadiriyya*, have been characterized by mutual suspicion and competition (Cissé, 2009: pp. 5-33; Ouédraogo, 2007: p. 10).

Taken together, these interconnected historical layers—commerce, mediation, language, architecture, relations with political authority, colonial and educational transformations—provide a foundation for discussing the various forms that Islamization may have taken in West Africa, and particularly in the *Moogo*, within broader historiographical debates.

4. Discussion of the Findings

The empirical findings presented above call for discussion along four main lines:

the actual significance of the Moaaga distinctive historical trajectory; the role of intermediary groups; the nature of the contemporary legacy of these interactions; and, finally, a comparative perspective with neighboring Muslim cities, before addressing the limitations of the present study.

4.1. A Distinctive Trajectory That Must Be Qualified

The findings of this study invite a critical reassessment of dominant paradigms regarding Islamization in West Africa. A significant body of historiography has long favored an essentially political reading of the phenomenon, whereby the spread of Islam was explained primarily through the activities of the great Sudanic empires, military conquests, or religious war movements. The empirical evidence presented above invites us to qualify, without entirely rejecting, the thesis of *Moaaga* exceptionalism.

While it is true that no Muslim theocratic state ever supplanted the *Moogo*, unlike what occurred in the Fulani *Macina* or *Fouta-Djalou*. Yet this political resistance never prevented—and paradoxically even facilitated, by making Islam socially acceptable—a profound process of economic, linguistic, and architectural penetration, as documented in Sections 2.1 to 2.4. The *Moogo* did not resist Islam as such; rather, it resisted the Islamization of political authority. This is a crucial distinction that historiography focused on resistance has too often obscured by conflating the absence of conquest with the absence of influence.

The evidence confirms that interaction with the Arab-Muslim world did not lead to an Islamization of the state comparable to that observed in certain kingdoms and political formations of *Mali*, *Songhay*, *Macina*, or *Fouta-Djalou*. *Moose* political institutions retained their autonomy throughout the precolonial period, even as commercial and religious exchanges intensified.

This observation aligns with the foundational work of [Triaud \(1973\)](#), who emphasized the gradual, non-linear, and socially differentiated character of Islamic penetration into Sudano-Sahelian societies, challenging a teleological interpretation that would regard the widespread conversion of populations as an inevitable historical outcome. The *Moaaga* case provides a compelling illustration of this process.

Several centuries of commercial and religious contact did not produce mass Islamization before the twentieth century. They nevertheless generated, at an earlier stage, a process of material and linguistic acculturation that subsequently facilitated, without necessarily determining, the demographic expansion of Islam described in Section 2.6.

Furthermore, these findings allow us to go beyond this institutional interpretation by showing that the relative stability of the religious order did not result from political or cultural isolation. Rather, it resulted from a deliberate capacity for selective integration. *Moose* rulers welcomed foreign Muslim merchants, scholars, and artisans while maintaining the preeminence of the *Naam* as the supreme principle of political legitimacy.

This dynamic requires a fundamental reconsideration of the conventional opposition between “resistance” and “Islamization.” The interactions observed here are better understood as the outcome of a continuous process of negotiation than as a confrontation between two competing cultural systems. The *Moogo* emerges as a space of exchange in which innovations were adapted to local structures rather than simply imposed from outside.

If the political resistance of the *Moogo* alone cannot explain the slow pace of demographic Islamization, this is because a specific set of social actors carried, mediated, and negotiated the terms of this process: the intermediary groups examined in Section 2.2, whose role therefore deserves renewed attention.

4.2. The Structuring Role of Intermediary Groups

The second major contribution of this historiographical reinterpretation lies in reassessing the agency of the intermediary groups—namely the *Yarse*, *Fulbe*, *Zangoeto*, and *Marânse*—which have too often been reduced in general syntheses to mere transmission belts between an external Islam and a supposedly homogeneous *Moaaga* society. The findings show that these groups performed much broader functions than those traditionally attributed to them. They were genuine cultural mediators, simultaneously facilitating the circulation of goods, languages, technologies, religious knowledge, and social practices.

In this regard, the foundational work of Kouanda highlights that these groups intermediary constituted social actors in their own right, capable of negotiating their status, reshaping identity boundaries through processes of reciprocal assimilation such as “*yarsification*,” and provided the royal authority with religious and commercial services upon which it was structurally dependent.

Understanding the historical Islamization of the *Moogo* therefore requires moving beyond the binary opposition between the *Kudumde* (customary traditions) of the *Nanambse* and Islam, and instead restoring the social complexity and agency of these merchant intermediaries.

Furthermore, the *Moogo* case enriches existing analytical models by demonstrating that intermediaries were not merely agents of cultural diffusion. They also played a role in political regulation. Their integration into the *Moose* kingdoms rested on a balance between economic recognition and submission to customary authority. This configuration helps explain why Arab-Muslim influences were able to spread without producing a radical transformation of existing power structures.

Intermediary groups did not simply transmit external innovations; they actively adapted to the political and social norms of the *Moogo*. This concept provides a potentially useful analytical framework for the study of other Sahelian societies characterized by considerable cultural diversity.

This sociocultural mediation did not cease with the advent of the precolonial period. Rather, it was reconfigured under colonial rule and subsequently in the contemporary period, raising the question of continuity and rupture in the historical legacy examined here.

4.3. Contemporary Continuities and Ruptures

The third axis of discussion concerns the precise nature of the contemporary legacy outlined in Sections 2.6 and 2.7. Should this legacy be conceptualised primarily in terms of continuity, as suggested by the title of this article, or in terms of rupture, as the demographic shift of the twentieth century might suggest—a shift that transformed Islam from a long-minoritized and politically subordinate religion into the majority religion of the country? In reality, the two interpretations are complementary.

There is undeniable continuity in the channels through which Islam spread: trade, mobility, family-based Qur’anic education, Sufi mediation, and the structural relationship between Islam and customary authority, which remained largely non-confrontational until relatively recently. Conversely, there is a profound rupture in the scale. What was, for several centuries, largely the concern of specialized diasporic communities became, within the space of a century, the majority religious affiliation of the country.

This shift in scale largely explains the new vulnerability of the former equilibrium to radicalization dynamics emanating from the central Sahel since the mid-2010s. The *Yarse*, *Fulbe*, *Zāngoeto*, and *Marānse* forms of Islam, together with Sufi traditions, described in this article developed through a long-established practice of negotiation with customary authorities and through a well-documented plurality of *Tijaniyya*, *Qadiriyya*, and *Hamalliyya* affiliations, as identified by Otayek.

As highlighted by the International Crisis Group report, the Burkinabè model of religious coexistence, although historically resilient, is not impervious to regional developments, particularly the rise of rigorist forms of Islam inspired by Wahhabism. This is the same current that Cissé examines under the designation of the Sunnite Movement, whose approach is less compatible with the traditions of compromise that had characterized local Islam for centuries (International Crisis Group, 2016: Section II.C; Cissé, 2009).

The tension between structural continuity and a rupture in scale is not unique to the *Moogo*. Indeed, it becomes clearer when compared with other West African societies that, despite sharing a broadly similar cultural substrate, followed markedly different political trajectories.

4.4. A Comparative Perspective: The *Jula* Muslim Trading Cities of the Region

A comparison with the *Jula* Muslim trading cities situated along the southern and western margins of the *Moogo*, most notably the kingdom of *Kong* in present-day northern Côte d’Ivoire, sheds light, by contrast, on the distinctive trajectory of *Moaaga* society.

These cities, whose religious architecture belongs to the same Sudano-Sahelian architectural tradition as the mosques of the *Moogo* examined in Section 2.4, followed a different political trajectory. Islam did not remain a minority phenome-

non subordinated to customary authority; rather, from the eighteenth century onward, it became a significant foundation of urban political authority.

As UNESCO highlighted during the World Heritage inscription of eight mosques of this architectural tradition in northern Côte d'Ivoire on the List, they bear witness to the enduring fusion between Arab-Berber Islamic architectural forms and indigenous building techniques. In principle, this fusion is comparable to that observed in the *Moogo* (UNESCO, 2021).

The *Moogo* therefore shares with these cities a common religious material culture, the same tradition of earthen architecture, and the same *Jula-Wangara* commercial networks that contributed to the dissemination of Islamic knowledge, but it did not share their political outcome.

This divergence, originating from a shared cultural and commercial substrate, demonstrated that the political outcome of the encounter with Islam was not predetermined by the nature of the encounter itself. Instead, it depended upon the capacity of each local political authority to contain, regulate, or appropriate the new forms of religious legitimacy made available through these interactions.

The comparison rests on three criteria. The first is a shared architectural and commercial foundation, already in place. The second concerns the source of legitimacy of the ruling power. The third relates to the institutional role, where applicable, granted to Islamic law or religious figures in the succession and administration of the political entity. On the first two points, the cases are very similar. On the third, they diverge. In Kong, the Ouattara dynasty formulated its authority in Islamic terms as early as the 18th century. Religious figures exercised recognized administrative functions alongside the ruling lineage. The architecture of the mosques, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, confirms this fusion in the very structure itself: these buildings served both as places of worship and seats of power. In *Moogo*, there is nothing of the sort. As Section 2.5 shows, the imamate of *Waogdgo* remained an appointed and revocable office under the *Moognaaba* regime, and the legitimacy of no *Moogo* ruler was ever based on Islamic law. A single commercial and architectural foundation thus coexisted with two distinct arrangements of religious and political authority. This is the compelling basis for treating the fate of the *Moogo* as a matter of local political choice, and not simply as a consequence of exposure to Islam.

4.5. Scientific Contributions: Toward a Model of Managed Political Integration

In light of these findings, the present study offers a revised conceptual framework for interpreting relations between the *Moogo* and the Arab-Muslim world. Unlike diffusionist approaches, which often portray Islamization as a linear process, the evidence examined here highlights a sequence of interactions in which local political authorities retained significant capacity for choice, regulation, and adaptation.

This study therefore proposes the concept of managed political integration. This concept refers to a historical process through which a society gradually in-

corporates external economic, religious, and cultural influences without altering the fundamental principles of its institutional organization.

Three characteristics define this model:

First, economic openness does not entail political dependence. Trans Sahelian trade strengthened the capacities of the *Moogo* kingdoms without undermining their sovereignty.

Second, new religious traditions are tolerated in areas where they provide social or economic value, while remaining subject to customary authority. Islam could develop within the *Moogo*, but its institutional and political implications remained regulated by the principles of the *Naam*.

Third, cultural transformations result from selective appropriation rather than the replacement of local traditions. New practices were adapted to existing structures rather than simply displacing them. These three characteristics function better as observable criteria than as descriptive labels: (i) a continuous flow of commercial, religious, or cultural resources from outside to the *Moogo*; (ii) the absence of any transfer of sovereign prerogatives (succession, taxation, military command) to Muslim institutions; (iii) the adaptation of imported practices to existing customary forms, rather than their outright replacement. Applied to the four areas examined above, they yield the following. Trade demonstrates sustained economic openness (i), without the *Moogo* losing control of markets or taxation (ii). The intermediate groups (*Yarse*, *Zāngoeto*, *Marānse*, and *Fulbe*) exhibit selective integration (iii): they are absorbed by customary categories (*Yarnaaba* and *yarsification*) instead of supplanting them. Religious authority illustrates criterion (ii) particularly clearly, as the imamate remains revocable by the *Moognaaba*. Finally, the political institutions preserved the *Naam* intact throughout the entire period, thus satisfying all three criteria. This framework does not resolve all ambiguous cases, particularly those concerning the margins of *Yarse*'s political involvement discussed in 3.2. It does, however, have at least one merit: it makes the model's assertions open to criticism where they were previously merely illustrative.

This model extends Michel Izard's analyses of *Yatēnga*'s political institutions by introducing a dynamic historical dimension. It likewise operationalises Joseph Ki-Zerbo's work on the endogenous adaptive capacities of African societies by demonstrating concretely how these societies constructed their own forms of modernity from multiple external influences.

Beyond the specific case of the *Moogo*, this theoretical proposition may contribute to renewing scholarship on processes of cultural circulation and interaction in precolonial Sahelian societies.

However, illuminating these scientific contributions may be, they should not obscure the methodological limitations inherent in the present study. These limitations must therefore now be explicitly addressed.

4.6. Limitations of the Study

This reinterpretation has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The cor-

pus of sources used in this study, reflecting the existing historiography, focuses primarily on the central and northern *Moogo*, leaving relatively unexplored the specific dynamics of the *Gourma*, *Liptako*, and *Senufo* regions, where the penetration of the Arab-Muslim world followed different chronological trajectories and relied on distinct channels.

Similarly, some essential sources for this study could not be consulted in their entirety because they have not been digitized or are not freely accessible. Their content was therefore reconstructed from references to them that converge across several published studies in which they are cited and summarized.

This limitation, which reflects the current state of available documentation on *Mossi* country, calls for caution regarding the degree of precision that can be attributed to certain claims. It also underscores the need for further archival research, particularly through systematic consultation of unpublished manuscripts, oral sources, and locally preserved historical documentation.

5. Conclusion

The *Moogo* was never an isolated hinterland cut off from the Arab-Muslim world. On the contrary, it constituted one of its most active southern gateways, connected from the second millennium onward to the Mediterranean and the *Hejaz* through trans-Saharan trade. These interactions, which were predominantly peaceful and commercial, were facilitated by specialized diasporic communities, notably the *Yarse*, *Zāngoeto*, and *Marānse*, who succeeded in establishing recognized positions within *Moaaga* society without fundamentally challenging the existing political order.

The markers of this centuries-long interaction remain deeply embedded in the social fabric, linguistic heritage, and architecture of contemporary Burkina Faso. They are evident in the religious lexicon of *Moore*, the onomastics of *Moose* lineages, the earthen mosques of *Waogdgo*, and the Sufi landscape inherited from the nineteenth-century religious wars. The *Moaaga* paradox does not lie in absolute resistance to Islam itself, but rather in a form of integration conditioned by subordination to customary authority. This configuration was distinctive within the Sahel, but it should by no means be interpreted as evidence of cultural impermeability.

Re-examining this historical legacy extends beyond a purely academic exercise. At a juncture when Burkina Faso is confronted with trends of religious radicalization emerging from a broader Sahelian crisis, understanding the historically negotiated and locally rooted forms of Islam can help distinguish between historical continuity and contemporary rupture.

The primary objective of this study was to analyze the historical relations between the *Moogo* and the Arab-Muslim world and their contribution to political, economic, religious, cultural, and intellectual transformations between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.

First, the findings qualify interpretations that associate the Islamization of West

Africa primarily with military conquest or the expansion of major Muslim states. In the *Moogo*, initial contacts developed through trans-Saharan commercial networks. Caravans, markets, and Sahelian trade routes facilitated not only the circulation of goods but also the movement of languages, technologies, religious practices, and knowledge. Trade was the principal driver of these interactions long before any major institutional transformation took place.

Secondly, the study highlights the pivotal role of merchant intermediaries. The *Yarse*, *Fulbe*, *Zāngoeto*, and *Marānse* were not passive economic agents. They acted as mediators through whom goods, knowledge, languages, and religious ideas circulated. Their gradual integration into *Moose* societies facilitated the introduction of innovations without disrupting existing political structures. Cultural circulation was thus the product of complex social networks in which local actors were as important as external influences.

Third, the analysis of religious transformations demonstrates that Islam became established through adaptation rather than substitution. Muslim communities developed their religious, educational, and commercial activities within a framework in which customary institutions retained their legitimacy. *Moose* rulers adopted a pragmatic policy: they welcomed Muslim merchants and scholars while maintaining the supremacy of the *Naam*. This coexistence contributed to the emergence of a plural society in which Islam and local traditions coexisted over the long term.

Fourth, Arab-Muslim influences enriched local linguistic practices, education, and construction techniques. Arabic writing, Qur'anic schools, and earthen construction techniques attest to a significant intellectual and cultural openness. Yet these innovations were consistently reinterpreted within *Moose* social and political frameworks, complementing established systems rather than replacing them.

Fifth, political analysis confirms that unlike neighboring Sahelian states where Islam became a foundational matrix of state legitimacy, the *Moose* kingdoms preserved their institutional principles until the colonial conquest. Royal authorities integrated Muslim communities into economic and diplomatic life without granting them a decisive role in succession or political sovereignty.

The resilience of the *Naam* confirms that openness to external influences did not result in political dependence, but rather in the managed integration of innovations compatible with local institutional balances.

Based on this empirical insight, this study reformulates a revised conceptual framework: the concept of managed political integration. This model describes how a society progressively incorporates external influences while preserving the foundations of its political organization. It rests on three principal characteristics: controlled openness to commercial networks, selective integration of innovations, and the preservation of customary sovereignty.

This framework moves past binary oppositions between resistance and Islamization, closure and openness, or tradition and modernity.

Historiographically, it extends Michel Izard's work on *Moose* institutions by

emphasizing the mechanisms of cultural mediation that contributed to their resilience. It also builds upon Joseph Ki-Zerbo's analyses of processes of innovation within African societies and engages with the contributions of scholars such as Otayek and Kouanda.

By repositioning the *Moogo* within broader Sahelian dynamics, this study demonstrates that the *Moose* kingdoms fully participated in regional processes of exchange without surrendering their capacity for autonomous political decision-making.

The implication of this study extends beyond historical synthesis. In a context marked by tensions surrounding social cohesion, heritage preservation, and struggles over identity and cultural ownership, the experience of the *Moogo* reminds us that African societies developed forms of stability based on dialogue, negotiation, and the managed integration of diversity.

The *Moose* kingdoms were neither closed nor static. Rather, they constituted spaces in which diverse influences could coexist without undermining their foundational principles. This institutional flexibility is perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of their history—and it also provides an important key to understanding contemporary politics and culture in West Africa.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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