Christopher Wise
“Al Hajj Sekou Tall and Yambo Ouologuem: Violence and the Islamic Public Sphere in West Africa”

Taking his lead from Rousseau’s Social Contract, Kant insisted in “Perpetual Peace” that a law that is not backed up with force is no law at all. Kant’s underscoring of the interdependence of the law and its necessarily forceful implementation led Nietzsche to assert that Kant’s categorical imperative “reeked of cruelty.” Whereas Habermas tends to conceptualize the outbreak of violence as a form of distorted communication, Rousseau and Kant’s understanding of the law implies that what Habermas calls “inter-subjective” communication is not ever possible without the exercise of force, which is always in some sense arbitrary. The title of Yambo Ouologuem’s novel Le devoir de violence similarly underscores Ouologuem’s view that there is no such thing as a public sphere that is completely free of irrational violence, and that in certain circumstances it is even a moral duty to enact violence against the other (hence the title of his novel “the duty of violence”).

Rather than embrace any idealized communicative situation, Ouologuem encourages his readers to be more thoughtful “violence-doers” in the public sphere; or, he urges them to be aware of the difference between careful and thoughtful “violence-doing” as opposed to unnecessarily and excessive “violence-doing.” In this sense, Ouologuem’s views are akin to those of Martin Heidegger, who spoke of human technology as “the violence-doing of the knowing.” In my presentation, I will compare and contrast the respective views of Ouologuem and Al Hajj Sekou Tall, two 20th century Sahelian authors from Bandiagara, Mali, and both members of the Umarian Tidjaniyya.

As opposed to quasi-Cartesian notions of the individual like that of Habermas, the notion of the individual that one finds in the writings of Tall and Ouologuem does not promote what Tall calls “the myth of a pure identity” but is instead inherently other-directed. For Tall, Africa did not need to learn humanism from studying great European philosophers, rather African society has always been a humanistic one. But Tall also affirms traditional and commonly stigmatized rites like excision, tribal cutting, and scarification because they bind the individual to the other, and to his or her community, and therefore create the necessary conditions for the emergence of a rational public sphere, or a society where one may lawfully, peacefully, and
rationally interact with one’s other. Ouologuem’s views do not contradict those of Tall although Ouologuem suggests that the suffering caused by the law’s violent application can and should be mitigated in contemporary African society. If it is a duty to execute the law and thereby perform an arbitrary act of violence against one’s other, it is also a duty to insure that those upon whom one enacts one’s “duty of violence” not needlessly suffer from the law’s forceful execution. For this reason, Ouologuem draws attention in Le devoir de violence to the historical failure of West African Muslims to construct a more humane society, wherein Africa’s children might be delivered from so much unnecessary pain and suffering. As opposed to Habermasian notions of inter-subjective rational communication, the respective views of Tall and Ouologuem are anti-Cartesian and satisfyingly resonate with long-standing conceptions of the law in the history of African Islamic society in ways that Habemas’ views do not. Ouologuem’s suggestion that the law might be more humanely executed in West African society has perhaps never seemed more urgent than it is today; that is, in the aftermath of the jihad of AQIS (“Al-Qaeda in the Sahel”) militants, or the Ansar Dine, MOJWA, and AQIM, who recently sought to implement sharia law in Northern Mali in brutal, excessive, and inhumane ways.