Dorothea E. Schulz (University of Cologne), “Public argument and the ‘common good’ in contemporary Mali”

The crisis of the Malian nation-state and the political upheaval in its northern regions since early 2012 have brought to the fore the ambivalent role played by Muslim organizations and actors who call for a reordering of public and domestic life according to Islamic precepts. As these actors mobilize religious values and norms in political conflict, this raises new questions about how ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ interlock and hence about the existence (and nature) of an “Islamic public sphere”. The purpose of my paper is twofold. Firstly, it probes recent scholarly engagements with Habermas’s concept of the public sphere and the attempts by some scholars to ‘amend’ Habermas’s lack of attention to the role of religion in the historical emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in 18th century Central Europe. The second purpose of my paper is to assess the heuristic value of the notion of ‘Islamic public’ by discussing the extent to which this notion sheds light on the political salience of networks and idioms of Islamic renewal in Mali. My paper proceeds in two steps. Firstly, it retraces the longer history of Islam’s political salience in present-day Mali and relates it to the complex genealogy of the contemporary religious field in Mali, which emerged through the mutual constitution of “Islam” as a set of religious institutions, practices and traditions on one side, and the institutional structures of laïcité in colonial and postcolonial Mali on the other. In a second step, the paper discusses the tension-ridden ways in which Muslim activists and political organizations seek to build a public order based on Islamic precepts and regulations. Here, it points to differences but also significant parallels in recent developments in Mali’s south and northern territories. Thirdly, the paper argues that in both areas, the long-standing alliances between Muslim organizations and state institutions and officials disprove the identification of a distinct “Islamic public sphere” in Mali as the central site of politics. At the same time, the concept of ‘public’ still proves useful for an analysis of the conditions and constraints that allow or preclude different groups of actors to promote their visions of collective interest and common good in the national political arena.