

Re/mapping the Sites of Religious Experience and Authority: Female “Preachers” and Radio-Mediated Sermonizing in Urban Mali

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Over the last decades, Malian urban life has undergone a significant transformation in the forms and degree in which supporters of Islamic moral renewal, men and women, have gained public standing and visibility. The paper explores how transformations in the Malian media landscape, among them the multiplication of private radio stations, have contributed to a reconfiguration of the conditions and contours of Muslim public debate and, most notably, of the place and significance of female “radio preachers”. The paper takes a controversy over the appearance of several female “preachers” on local radio as a window onto the often ambivalent reactions to (what many listeners perceive as) a radio-mediated dissociation of voice, physical presence, and religious authority. The paper argues that radio communication, similar to other audio recording and transmission technologies, not only transforms perceptions of the relevance of religious experience to everyday life. These technologies reconfigure the ways in which “religious values” are debated, and individual responsibility for salvation is assumed, attributed and contested. In this process, prevalent understandings of religious subjectivity and female virtue and religious authority are assessed, challenged and partly remade. By emphasizing both the historical continuities and changes in these reassessments, the paper enters a plea for a careful exploration of the nexus between shifting boundaries between the public and domestic realms, gender dynamics and changing notions of political and religious subjectivity.