Cooper, Barbara

*Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2006, 462pp., 978 0 2532 2233 6, $49.95

Barbara Cooper’s wonderful book tells the story of the Sudan Interior Mission, an evangelical Christian organization in the Hausa area of Maradi, Niger, and also traces the histories of the various indigenous churches that the Mission gave rise to. A historian by training and profession, Cooper’s work is admirably interdisciplinary. She incorporates ethnographic fieldwork, and displays acute sensitivity to the indigenous categories of meaning adopted by her subjects. A major theme of the book is the impossibility of establishing self-enclosed religious identities of Christian, Muslim, or traditionalist. This is a complexity that Cooper also underscores with respect to the internal richness of religious traditions, elaborating on evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, and Catholicism within Christianity, as well as reformist, Sufi, and orthodox tendencies within Islam.

The significance of Cooper’s book, already recognized with a Herskovits Award in 2007, is manifold. Cooper challenges the Comaroffs’ influential model of missionary-convert encounters as a ‘long conversation’ by revealing a richer and more nuanced reality than binary dialogue. Cooper’s book is also notable in that it awards comparable weight to the voices of missionaries and local Christians. Furthermore, as a rare study of American missionaries, the book adds depth to our understanding of the modern missionary enterprise in Africa. Antimaterialist and deeply wary of any marker of secular success, Cooper’s study challenges any identification of Christian missionaries as the spiritual vanguard of white governance of Africa. Moreover, the book contributes to a growing historical scholarship that counters the isolationist thrust of much Americanist scholarship by recognizing the United States as a significant overseas political power.

Much of the book is devoted to tracing the three-way interactions between Christians, Muslims, and the mediums and adherents of a spirit-possession cult known as *Bori*. Cooper shows how Christians offered complex, sometimes contradictory, assertions of both their similarities to and differences from their numerous religious competitors. Thus evangelical Christians underscored the common ground they share with Islam, but only in order to then proceed to demonstrate their superiority. On the other hand, these same Christians were far-more chary of any hint of their affinity to popular *Bori* cults, deliberately sidestepping practices such as drumming or spirit possession. This, Cooper suggests, was largely due to Christians’ anxiety about being wrongly identified
by critical Muslim neighbours as merely a lightly Christianized version of the Bori cult.

These entanglements between the region’s various religious traditions are further explored in Cooper’s superb chapter on biblical translation. Through fine-grained linguistic analysis, Cooper demonstrates that biblical translation was a collaborative, contested encounter between the missionary and local audiences. She discusses how American evangelical missionaries, Hausa-speaking Christian converts, and Muslims literate in Arabic all offered distinct literary and theological contributions to the work of biblical translation. A particular point of interest was the choice of missionary translators and their Hausa-speaking colleagues to render God as Allah, thereby emphasizing Christianity’s proximity to a rival monotheism, but in the process rejecting the far more likely Hausa term for the creator God, Ubangiji, a word denoting the ‘father of the house’ and thus closely aligned to the Judeo-Christian Bible’s beneficent creator God. Cooper argues that adopting Islam’s theological vocabulary meant missionaries unwittingly ceded control of their texts to Muslim lenses, as well as passed up the opportunity to tap into a pre-Islamic religious language.

Gender—and in particular the contests enacted by Christians, Muslims, traditionalists, and administrators around female autonomy—is a further strand that Cooper pursues throughout the book. Despite the American evangelical romanticization of the hardy male missionary pioneer, the reality was that beginning in the 1950s far more American women than men undertook evangelistic work in Niger. Women occupied consequential roles in the indigenous churches as well. However, Cooper shows that both American missionaries and African Christians joined forces to offer restrictive definitions of female Christian agency. By casting marriage as a self-contained conjugal unit, the Mission’s teachings cut off women from potentially empowering wider kinship networks. Furthermore, the Mission’s rural development strategies ironically privileged reformist Islamic judicial conceptions that obscured female agency and property ownership, thereby ultimately failing to promote the interests of its female converts.

If women found the Mission’s resources a mixed bag, then what were the conclusions of Nigerien society more broadly? One of the orthodoxies of mission history is that Africans converted to Christianity partly to access material benefits. Cooper nuances this line of interpretation by showing just how ambivalent and partial missionaries’ provision of education and medicine was. Despite their typically Protestant emphasis on reading, the Mission’s policy was not to create an educated Christian elite, but only to offer partial ‘Bible school’ training that equipped converts to read the sacred scriptures and little