RECOGNIZING RELIGION IN DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESSES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A Case from Niger

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"While many so-called development specialists might be agnostic about the role of religion, their intended recipients clearly are not."James[1]

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, despite the constitutional reiteration of secularism (*laïcité*) in Niger, Muslims have sought to capitalize on a new dynamism Islam has gained, going as far as to demand the full implementation of Islamic law in all domains of public life. Clearly, the tendency to draw on Islam as a template for ideas and practices particularly when Muslim actors envision alternative political realities and attempt to reconfigure established boundaries of civil and social life, (SALVATORE and EICKELMAN, 2004) marks contemporary Islam in Niger. How this development affects the moral economy of the society? What kind of spaces, moral communities and perceptions of Islam emerge from this appropriation of Islam in contemporary Niger? How to conceptualize the civility these communities invoke, in particular when they see their work as a due service to their religion?

These questions that revolve around a civic culture informed by Islamic principles are at the heart of this paper. I argue that to understand contemporary Muslim societies, and more precisely

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the construction of Islamic moral communities in Niger, we need to consider the spaces and the ways of being Muslim individual Muslims and Islamic organizations promote. Their religious ideology is generally grounded in initiatives that focus on Islamic learning, its acquisition and transmission as a transformative process that would reform the society and consequently the norms of its governance. This interest in the public articulation of religiosity has been a turning point in the sociopolitical history of Niger's postcolony, to use Mbembe's (2001) concept. Following the 1990s democratization and the proliferation of Islamic associations due to the opening up of both the public and the religious spheres, Muslim groups and communities now focus on the promotion of Islamic values as the normative basis of their institutions. This is predicated on the idea that the popularization of these values would reshape the ethical world of citizens and thereby the moral economy of the society.

Thus, to grasp the complexity these dynamics add to the meaning of civil society and their impact on the democratization processes in general, we need to take into consideration how promoters of Muslim religiosities conceive of the publicness of their religion. Indeed, reducing the genealogy of civil society to its secular trajectory, i.e. to a unilinear history, represents an epistemological obstacle that hinders the understanding of contemporary Muslim sociabilities and the on-going social transformation processes, not only in Niger, but also across Muslim Africa and even beyond (BOWEN, 2007; ASAD, 2003; SEN, 2007).

In other words, starting this examination by focusing on Niger provides us with a window to look at how a recent democratization, which began with the assumptions of a radical secularism – *laïcité* – is actually informing various kinds of Muslim publics. The discourses Muslims now articulate, their practices and institutions

indicate a shift in the way many Muslim public actors in Niger view governance and politics in general, but then illustrate also how these actors reinvent concepts, ideas and practices to respond to the challenges of political reform and modernity. The communities, concerns, spaces and institutions that emerge within this context represent therefore a window for an insight into the relationship between religious discourse and publicness, but they exemplify also the ways in which religious practices and claims can foster the construction of moral communities.

This key transformative process is not exclusive to Niger, but is observable not only across Muslim West Africa (BRENNER, 2001; SOARES and OTAYEK, 2007), but also in the Muslim world (STARRETT, 1998; SALVATORE and EICKELMAN, 2004; HIRSHKIND, 2006; REETZ, 2006; HEFNER, and ZAMAN, 2007; SALVATORE, 2007) and across the global south where religiosity is increasingly resorted to in order to grasp profound sociopolitical processes. Although I focus on Niger, how these claims of civic service are carried out in concrete sociopolitical formations is at the center of the sociopolitical modernity of Muslim West Africa, and more broadly of Muslim societies, as can illustrate the emerging field of study termed Muslim Modernities (ALIDOU, 2005a; BAYAT and HERRERA, 2010; HAJ, 2009; KANE, 2003b; SAJOO and INSTITUTE OF ISMAILI STUDIES, 2008; KHAIR and VERMA, 2008; MASUD, SALVATORE, and BRUINESSEN, 2009; HUNTER and EBRARY INC., 2009; SALVATORE, 2007; DIOUF and LEICHTMAN, 2009).

The main purpose of this paper is to emphasize the problematic of these mordernities in Niger and open up a conversation on the role and the significance of religion in contemporary sociopolitical configurations, in particular from the South. In the first section,

drawing from the literature on the public sphere and some of its theorizations, I theoretically situate my paper, highlighting the significance of the approach I privilege. In the second section, I provide a background on Niger to help understand the role Islam has played in the public sphere in the last two decades. Then, I draw from this development, what I call the Islamic civil society, a body of institutions and actors who have taken the mission to defend Islam and promote its values. Its goal is not to obstruct democracy, but to guide the democratization process by providing it with the normative framework that fits Nigerien society. In the last section, before I draw some of the theoretical consequences of these developments for policy makers and developers, I examine the new Islamic knowledge economy as one of the transformative aspects of Islam in Niger.

LOCATING MY PROBLEMATIC

A significant body of contemporary literature on Islam and Muslim societies centers on the problematic of the public sphere. The questions raised are not so much an engagement with the classical debate about the fitness of Islam in a democratic sphere. Rather, they testify to the interest in theorizing this sphere within Muslim context (MEYER and MOORS, 2006; SALVATORE, EICKELMAN, and EBRARY INC., 2004; HOEXTER, EISENSTADT and LEVTZION, 2002). In general, global discourses of democratization and liberalism have influenced this literature (HEFNER, 2000; SACHEDINA, 2001; HEFNER, 2005). For these discourses, public participation and the redefinition of the normative framework of governance have become critical issues (SINGERMAN, 1995; HEFNER, 2000; WICKHAM, 2002). The central claims here revolve around the hybridity (HEFNER, 2000), the pluralism (SCHULZE, 2000;

ESPOSITO and VOLL, 2001; EICKELMAN and ANDERSON, 1999; SALVATORE and EICKELMAN, 2004), and the alternative modes of being of Muslim publics (HIRSCHKIND, 2006; SOARES and OTAYEK, 2007). Most of this literature takes Habermas's (1989) work on the public sphere as its points of departure. However, Habermas's genealogy of the public sphere, at least in its first development, has not only ignored religion, but has also overlooked the non-European, including the Muslim world. His tying of the public sphere with critical reasoning and bourgeois social formation has proved problematic for the notion of public sphere and for comparative social theory, even though his position in regard to religion in the public space has since changed. Islamicists have sought to build upon the Habermasian insight – and shortcomings – (MEYER and MOORS, 2006; SALVATORE, EICKELMAN and Ebrary Inc., 2004; HOEXTER, EISENSTADT and LEVTZION, 2002) to problematize the existence, the emergence and the reshaping of the public sphere in Muslim contexts. A significant theoretical move in this instance consisted in countering the Enlightenment's premise, which also undergirds the early Habermasian theorization that religion must stay outside of the public sphere because of its insufficient deliberative capacity and the risk of corruption it carries for a reasonable public.

The move has made inroads in Islamic studies, and more broadly in religious studies (MARX, 2003; HARDING, 2000; TAYLOR, 2007). It has even become a well established theoretical framework following Asad (1993, 2003), Salvatore (2007) and Hirschkind (2006) who, while arguing against any religious essentialism, have demonstrated that like all disciplining systems, religion constitutes a formation of power. Consequently, contemporary appropriations of Islam are constitutive of modern techniques of power.

This has therefore opened up the possibility to reexamine the public sphere as a sociopolitical space where not only public reason, but also civic reason (HIRSCHKIND, 2001; AN NA'IM, 2008) is mediated. This attention to Muslim modernities yields two conclusions: first, the public sphere is "beyond Europe and Before Modernity" (SALVATORE and EICKELMAN et al., 2004); and second, the problematic of public Islam transcends specific regions (BOWEN, 2007, 2003; BRENNER, 2001; MANDAVILLE, 2001; REETZ, 2006; ALIEVI and NIELSEN, 2003; ESPOSITO and BURGAT, 2003; SALVATORE and EICKELMAN, 2004; KHOSROKHAVAR, 1997; KEPEL, 1997; HEFNER, 2000).

In a democratizing Muslim sub-Saharan Africa, no issue has been more problematic than the recasting of politics in religious terms, as the demands for more consideration to Islam in the public affairs have become a major issue of Muslim politics (KANE, 2003a; SOULEY, 2007; ROSANDER and WESTERLUND, 1997). As I show in the pages below, by introducing the debate of the status of religiosity in the public arena and the structural question of the moral order (MASQUELIER, 1999; VILALLON, 1999; IDRISSA, 2005; SOUNAYE, 2005) Muslim activists are redefining the common good and the conditions of its realization. These development in contemporary Niger are significant enough to warrant the attention and the considertation of not only policymakers, but also of scholars who examine and seek to understand sociopolitical transformations in the South.

BACKGROUND

A Muslim majority country, Niger is among the most Islamized countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Recent statistics list

Niger second, after Mauritania, with more than 95% of its 13 millions population being Muslim. According to some Historians, already around 670, some Muslim populations were established in the Kawar, the far north Niger (HAMANI, 2007; ZAKARI, 2009). The trans-Saharan trade, the emergence of Muslim communities in the north and the east of today's Niger, the influence of individual scholars who have usually collaborated with incumbent authorities, the Usman Dan Fodio Jihad in the Hausaland and its neighboring countries, slowly, but gradually contributed to the making of Islam as the main religious tradition within the region (HAMANI, 1975; MEUNIER, 1998; NORRIS, 1990). In addition to these dynamics, although Muslims have not always been docile, becoming in many cases competitors who fought for legitimacy in front of the threat they face from the colonial rulers, it should be noted that colonial logics of governance have greatly contributed to the spread of Islam, a pattern one may observe in both the French and the British dominions in Africa. A central piece of the Sahel and the Sahara, a vast domain where Muslims traveled, transmitted knowledge and established their communities has been a *dar al Islam* (land of Islam) for many centuries. Agadez in the far north, Zinder in the Middle central and Say in the West were highly respected Islamic centers where many scholars from across West Africa have sought Islamic learning. In the last two decades however, as the country experienced new Islamic trends, discourses, actors and dynamics, Niamey, the capital city, and Maradi, a dynamic economic center, have become the main centers of a post-colonial Islam claiming more political role. Still, the state has consistently claimed a secular identity, perpetuating in many ways the colonial attitude vis-à-vis religion, religiosity and religious authorities.

Not surprisingly, the significance of these two urban areas in the development of Islam in Niger coincided with a restructuring trend that reshaped both the religious and the public sphere. In 1991, a democratization process ended the one-party rule and allowed the formation of a vibrant civil society and consecrates the freedoms of speech and religion, in line with a liberal democratic ideology (KIMBA; UNIVERSITÉ ABDOU MOUMOUNI, 2001). In the religious sphere, a proliferation of Islamic organizations ensued, providing organized Islam the institutional and discursive platforms for the articulation of normative claims on the public sphere and governance. The most recent statistics count around 50 Islamic associations. In comparison, there was only one Islamic organization legally authorized until 1991.

To counter what they depicted as a rampant secularization of the public domain, Muslim groups who claim to defend and speak for Islam have consistently challenged the secular norms of the state and the public sphere. In 1993, they targeted a family law reform initiative, *Projet de Code de la Famille,* a legal reform the state has initiated under the influence of feminist and human rights organizations. For its promoters, the *Code de la famille*, as it came to be known, would provide substantial rights to women and children, and reinforce the rule of law in matters related to conjugal disputes, child custody, succession, etc. It was finally dropped because of the opposition of the Islamic organizations, which argued that the reform not only contradicted Muslims' perceptions of the family and the common good, but it also threatened social stability.

Meanwhile, in the sector of education, Islamic activists who opposed what they view as a secularization trend that marginalizes religious education demanded the addition of Qur'anic classes to the public education curriculum. Although they have not yet entirely won

this de-secularization battle, the activists have nonetheless transformed the Islamic knowledge economy as they promote various forms of Islamic learning institutions (madrasa, informal learning centers, reading groups, etc.) and activities aiming at "spreading the word of the Qur'an" and enlightening the public (*wayewan kay*, in Hausa).

These two episodes had a significant impact on public Islam in Niger, not only because they served as the starting point for a systematic rally against the state's promotion of women's rights and family law, but because they represented a turning point in the presence of Islam in the public sphere, and certainly testify to the emergence of an alternative discourse on and about civic virtue.

THE EMERGENCE OF AN ISLAMIC CIVIL SOCIETY

One of the features of the public sphere in Niger in the recent years is the increasing claim by Islamic organizations to defend the common good and therefore counterbalance state social policies. The discourses they articulate, the positions they adopt, especially in relation to family planning and the promotion of women's rights, the initiatives they launch, especially in Islamic education, and the debates that ensued significantly changed the complexity of public Islam in Niger, affecting both the role, according to many actors, Islam ought to play in public affairs, and the configuration of its institutions. As it was expected, these developments have influenced political discourses and state initiatives, but they have also led to the formation of new social spaces (women, youth and students clubs), the emergence of new religious actors (women preachers and leaders of Islamic associations, young preachers, etc.), religion based circles of solidarity (*Markaz*) and more generally, it has mobilized various publics in promoting a pious life (*Aikin Adini*).

These institutions, spaces and actors constituted what I call the Islamic civil society, a body of actors now concerned with governance and the role Islamic principles play in it. Politically, many public actors resort to Islam as they seek to counter state initiatives and international conventions deemed to violate and pervert Niger's moral and religious identities (SOUNAYE, 2005). Using various platforms that emerged with the democratization ethos, they develop strategies that eventually provided them with a remarkable visibility in the public sphere. For example, the deregulation of the mediascape that came with the democratization process allowed the formation of new communicative spaces, especially with the FM radios and the non-governmental TV stations, which provide religious and political activists an avenue for public discourse. Obviously, these religious appropriations of the media are more perceptible in the urban areas where youth and most importantly women, have become major voices of the Islamic civil society. In fact, their weighing in debates in the public sphere has often proven decisive, as is the case with the recent controversy around the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (2005).

Theoretically, the notion of an Islamic civil society can be problematic, especially because of the ideological origins of the concept and its western connotation. I still want to use this notion to refer to the body of actors, discourses and initiatives, which, while they take advantage of the democratization ethos, promote the civility of religion against secularist negative understandings of the status of religiosity in the public arena. Some scholars of contemporary Islam in francophone West Africa have drawn attention to the way Islam has grown into a new public space in its own right (HOLDER, 2009; LAUNAY and SOARES, 1999; HASSANE, 2007). In Niger, because of the legacy of the French secularist culture built on a suspicion

vis-a-vis religiosity, political actors took a long time to adapt to the new visibility of religious discourses in the public arena, especially within the democratization period (1991 to the present) when these discourses challenge the constitutional separation between religion and the state. However, the sustained activism of numerous groups and associations allowed Islam to acquire the status of a normal source of political norms and values, fostering a religio-political discourse, which, even though it has not yet claimed overtly any political party, has made inroads in both the constitutional provision and the institutional arrangement of the state. For example, the last two constitutions of the country (1999, 2010) require state authorities such as the President, the Prime Minister and the President of the Parliament, to submit to a religious oath before they take office (SOUNAYE, 2007).

This restructuring of the Islamic sphere, the flows of ideas and images, and their impact on the country's moral economy, have drawn the attention of the state. Indeed, the formation of the Islamic civil society has affected the interactions within the public sphere, first, among Islamic organizations themselves, between the religious and the secular organizations, and between the Islamic organizations and the state institutions. For example, as far as the interactions with Muslims activists are concerned, the state has sought relevance in the Islamic sphere, arguing its responsibility to regulate public life and preserve peaceful coexistence. Following this line of argument, the government created, in 2003, an Islamic Council, and for the first time in the political history of Niger, a Ministry of Religious Affairs was created in 2007, echoing the growing influence of Muslim activists and illustrating the desire of the government to maintain a degree of control over the Islamic sphere. The same policy resorted to a series of ordinances aimed at regulating "anarchic construction

of mosques" (2005, 2006) and "provocative preaching" in order to prevent violent confrontations.

Obviously, this institutional move aimed to canalize a movement that state officials often see as a threat to public order and the mode of governance of a secular state; but it should also be read as the translation of a desire to accommodate religion and its claims of publicness. In many ways, the emergence of these religious actors claiming a civic role has a limiting effect on the state's ability to control and regulate the public sphere (NIANDOU; GADO, 1996). Clearly, this trend of measures can hardly hide the nervousness of the state to address the "Islamic issue", especially since Islamist groups have resorted to violence, thus providing a ground for a discourse that centers on security. The issue in this case has transcended national boundaries and has become a regional preoccupation, in particular in the last five years. In fact, policies within the region have not only affected religious institutions, the securitization discourse has also affected how e look at religion, in particular Islam.

RELIGION: A Transformative Force

Democratization has served as a catalyst for the restructuring of the Islamic sphere, as I have argued so far. This development often associated to an intrusion of religion in the public sphere will certainly have a lasting impact on Niger's social and political interactions. A careful attention to contemporary Muslims' creative appropriation of the Islamic institutions (MASQUELIER, 2009; SOUNAYE, 2012; ALIDOU, 2005a; HASSANE, 2005), the reform discourses they promote (ALIDOU and ALIDOU, 2008; SOUNAYE, 2009d) and the spaces Muslim actors create, will note an on-going transformation process heavily influenced by Islamic ideologies. There is no single

expression of Islam in Niger; instead, the fragmentation I referred to above has shown an increasing pluralism in the Islamic sphere in Niger. Yet, beyond the varieties and the complexities of these ideologies, they all contribute to further Islamize the Nigerien society, and by doing so, to reshape both individual and collective governmentalities (IDRISSA, 2007; SOUNAYE, 2007, 2009d).

Indeed, the most striking feature of Islam in Niger in the last two decades has been its social transformation impact. Both theologically and sociologically, Islam has experienced in recent years a diversification trend that in return brought to prominence new Islamic spaces, voices and actors, while expanding the relevance of religiosity in many sociopolitical arenas. Generally, the perception of Islam as social and political force has changed along with its institutional and informal representation in the public arena. This is illustrated by the way many activists have used Islamic claims to contest state initiatives and even demand the implementation of norms they found necessary in a context they promote Islam as the exclusive source of norms that fits Nigerien society. Undoubtedly, the discourses and initiatives the proponent of this political Islam have empowered Muslim actors who now realize the bargaining power their claims of religiosity and the growing impact of their practices and institutions within the Nigerien society, especially in urban areas (ALIDOU, 2005b).

However, this would have not been possible without a social transformation process in which Muslim activists have been key figures in contesting public policies and government initiatives. In many areas, Muslims' back their opposition with significant initiatives aimed to reinforce the moral state of the society. In the educational sector, for example, the claims of religiosity and the demand for the inclusion of Qur'anic classes in the curriculum

have prompted the creation of the institution now referred to as the Islamiyya madrasa. Now at the forefront of the de-secularization of the educational system (MEUNIER, 1997; SOUNAYE, 2009d), the Islamiyya emphasizes Islamic sciences, the teaching of the Qur'an and the tradition of the prophet Muhammad. In recent years, the Islamiyya has gradually developed into what many parents see as the moral and intellectual alternative. As they voice their dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the public educational system, one of the points many parents make is that education is morally corrupt, in addition of being bankrupt as it "no longer teach what students need, but what the policies allow", as an instructor remarked in Maradi (Mallam Sale, interview in 2008). Thus, on the one hand the Islamiyya has acquired credibility especially across urban areas where it expanded since the end of the 1990s; on the other hand, it has become a viable and sustainable institution, as it developed its own programs and subsequently acquired the formal recognition of the state. Besides, it has also provided a source of employment for many young people who, once unfit to the public education system, are now fully integrated and even in high demand.

With such a reputation many Islamiyya now apply directly for foreign assistance, in particular the scholarships from Saudi Arabia, Iran and Sudan, without the backing of the Ministry of education, a condition necessary for many such applications through the mid-1990s. In this sector, as one may notice, the State lost its centrality and its role as the main interlocutor in part because donors of scholarships now view civil society organizations and individual ulama entrepreneurs as credible partners. In any case, these changes helped many such Islamic learning institutions and individual promoters to carve a space for themselves and consolidate their positions within the society. Most importantly, the placement

of their graduates in foreign countries and in the local Islamic university has additionally boosted the reputation and credibility of many Islamiyya, which now compete in many foreign scholarship programs, once the preserve of the main Islamic organization of the country (*Association Islamique du Niger*) and its affiliate public madrasa, at least until 1990.

Historically, and in retrospect, the refusal by the state officials to consider the demands for the inclusion of Islamic subjects in the public school curriculum has indirectly favored the expansion and consolidation of the Islamiyya institution. Once they have been refused public support, the promoters of *le Coran à l›école* (Teach the Qur'an in our schools) had no choice but to develop their own initiatives, deploying their inventivity and imagination to make their Islamiyya work. In two urban areas, Maradi and Zinder, where I have researched the development of this institution, for example, most Islamiyya came out of the initiatives of individual religious entrepreneurs who sought an alternative to both the secular public school system and to the traditional Islamic learning institutions. Even though in many cases wealthy patrons contributed greatly to these initiatives, in providing financial support, granting land or building classrooms, for example, the critical role, however, was generally played by individual promoters who took the task of designing, overseeing and managing these institutions.

Certainly, one of the effects of the transformation of this space is the entrepreneurial spirit that now characterizes Islam in the public arena in Niger. Contributing to the transformation of social life and structures in urban Niger, these educational dynamics are leading to the formation of a social category of Muslim actors fully involved in this form of valorization of Islamic education. In Niamey, to confirm this social transformation trend, this elite is already visible

as it engages in a second phase of restructuring of Islamic learning institutions and thereby relegates the clerics to a secondary position. The point here is that the concomitant opening up of the religious space and the rise of this particular Islamic learning institution has thrown in the public arena Muslim actors who, claiming to serve their communities, are now social shifters and key players in the making of the contemporary Nigerien society.

Moreover, the networks of Islamic learning (Makarantu) they have established have transformed the Islamic knowledge economy and represent one of the most striking developments in the Islamic sphere in Niger. However, though they are designed to support the popularization of the Islamic scriptures, especially among youth and women, the Islamic learning centers have proved to be the base for various circles of solidarity. Spaces of various forms of socialization and sociability, these Islamic learning institutions have added diversity and complexity to urban sociabilities. For example, many women rely on their Makaranta (sing. of Makarantu) circles of solidarity for social events such as weddings and even funerals for which most families need assistance due the number of people gathering at these occasions and the amount of food and drinks they need to prepare. In other words, the socializations and interactions that begin within these learning circles gradually expand beyond the confines of these initial spaces to reach the broader society and the public sphere, as they become instance of social and cultural reproductions.

In fact, very manifest in the way that cultural events that used to be celebrated with panache, dance and ostentatious expenses now give way to more modest celebrations, though filled with signs and acts of piety, at least apparently. For example, the recitation of the Qur'an and *qasidas* (Islamic poetry) are part of naming ceremonies, weddings, or *walima*, that celebrate the admission to an exam or

the successful completion of a study program[2]. This daily reading of one's life through the lenses of its degree of religiosity has fostered a religious culture that is claiming a presence in almost all sectors of personal and public life. As a result, for numerous Muslims in Niamey, being good Muslims has become the purpose of their lives. Even the entertainment industry in Niamey is affected by this trend of islamization as cultural centers have become the stage for pious performances (SOUNAYE, 2011a).

Manifesting themselves through generational and gender shifts, these developments have propelled previously invisible segments of the society to the forefront of transformative religious entrepreneurship. Youth and women are particularly visible on these stages now that, following the opening up of both the public and the religious spheres, they authorize themselves to take initiatives while building grassroots organizations and promote pious lifestyles. In many public schools, for example, young religious entrepreneurs draw on the religiosity of the public space, so to speak, to develop activities aimed at maintaining a daily remembrance of Islam. Human beings are not perfect, they are forgetful, so they argue. Two decades ago, because of the secular nature of the educational system, appearing and being good Muslims was rather far from the preoccupation of these young people. Today, however, even though the system is still theoretically secular, religious activism has made its way within this arena where young religious entrepreneurs have taken the mission of calling their classmates and fellow students to commit to religious practice.

Youth Clubs (*Clubs des Jeunes Musulmans*) are the main spaces where such Islamic enthusiasm takes place, in general, in

[2] In defense of similar practices that puritan Muslims may reject because of their ostentatious nature, many claim: "It is *walima*; it's not ostentation!"

the name of *animation religieuse*. At the national level, they have devised various strategies to keep young people, in particular the educated ones, in pious practices. Demonstrating their role and agency as "social shifters", these new institutions have produced social and political reinterpretations of Islam that challenge on the one hand, traditional social organization and conventional understanding of Islam, and on the other hand, the authority of the Muslim clerics (ulama). These dynamics are most perceptible in urban centers where the networks of Islamic organizations, actors and media have expanded the most in recent years, supporting a new mediascape and a particularly dynamic Islamic market of ideas and merchandizing. Such a transformative visibility of religion in the public sphere does not only rely on an increasing number of young preachers who invent an Islamic televangelism, it has also led to the formation of an enthusiastic audience supportive of what they call an Islamic work (*aikin adini*). In my point of view, this fast growing audience and its impact on public opinion explain the concerns of state and political elites, defenders of secular norms, who expect to counter the influence of religion and religiosity in the political arena.

A close examination of the case in Niger shows that Islam has not only become a base for transformative dynamics that are now redefining the institutional foundations of social life; it serves also as a vehicle for a political ambition that targets the moral configuration of the society. Emphasizing the educational system, the primary space of socialization in the modern state, Muslim activists have set a civil society agenda, i.e. a contribution to the modes of framing governance and politics in general. They have bridged the institutional and the moral as they consolidate the role of Islam and religiosity within contemporary Nigerien society. Obviously, this trend and the turns it takes could not be overlooked if one has to

understand the contours of civil society in Niger and more generally if one has to examine how citizenry is defining the conditions of its participation in determining the framework of governance and the rule of law. Of course, the question remains: which law and what legal framework? Ongoing political crisis in the Muslim world and more specifically in parts of West Africa have brought to the front these questions, adding to the complexity of political governance and social change within these societies.

Some scholars have already made the argument that the reinterpretation, creative appropriations (STARRETT, 1998) and mobilization (WICKHAM, 2002) of Islam have already informed and nurtured a counterpublic (HIRSCHKIND, 2006, 2001). Some have also made the case for a Sahelian Islam, stressing the developments Islam is experiencing in the Sahel and the social transformation process Muslim societies within the region are experiencing (SOUNAYE, 2010; VILLALON, 2009, 2010)[3]. Of course, within the region and in the global south in general, the power of religiosity to transform and reshuffle social, economic and political arrangements cannot be denied. Instead, in many contexts, religion and religiosity are the main definers of social, political and even economic interactions. As the worldviews that gives meaning and status to the ideologies that govern social life, religion cannot be overlooked by any serious attempts at understanding the society and its historical shifts and trajectories. Therefore, for development to mean something within these societies, in particular in Niger – and

[3] In:<http://alternatives-economiques.fr/blogs/giraf/2010/11/15/islam-au-niger-de-la-contestation-a-la-normalisation/ >. Accessed in Aug. 16, 2012. L. Villalón, "From Argument to Negotiation: Constructing Democracies in Muslim West Africa," Comparative Politics, vol.42, 4, July 2010, pp.375-393; L. Villalón and J-L. Triaud, "Contraintes du local et ressources du global: L'Islam subsaharien entre économies morales et économie du marché." Afrique Contemporaine, vol 231, 2009, p. 23-43.

West Africa, as the cases of other countries in the region show[4]– it has to recognize and take seriously the forms of religiosity that unfold within these societies. Religion has generally been portrayed as a conservative force, resisting change, hindering freethinking and therefore alienating peoples and communities. This perception, as the last two decades have shown us across religious traditions and societies, is only part of the story. In any case, as I have argued, one has to recognize religiosity – positively or negatively – as a fundamental factor in the social life of contemporary Muslim societies. But, of course, as the literature on religious modernities show, this reality is far from being exclusive to Islam in Niger, Africa or the Muslim world: it runs across other religious traditions and societies, as Smilde (2007) shows.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, if development deals with social change and the possibility to influence internal processes that lead to social transformation, then its problematizations could not afford to ignore a major source of norms and values such as religion. If development implies for a society the ability to emancipate from external determinations so that this society could freely determine its choices and priorities, then it should not overlook a value source such as religion, which has been for long time and in most human societies a political, social and even economic force (ALAN VER BEEK, 2000; KITIARSA and Ebooks Corporation, 2007; RUDNUCKY, 2009). Not understanding this could affect the credibility of our scholarship,

[4] For example, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal are all countries that illustrate the political significance of Islam and the relevance of religion as a framer of civil society.

jeopardize the fitness of state policies and hinder the efficiency of development interventions. Thus, we will have fundamental problems in understanding development and problematizing it in many societies, in particular in the South, if we do not pay attention to the social conditions and the moral economies that drive these societies.

Of course, I have examined only part of the problematic of religiosity in the public sphere in Muslim Africa. An alternative could have stressed how securitization has become part of the problematic of governance in the Sahel and across the world, especially after September 11, and what is now referred to, perhaps too hastily, as the Arab Spring. Taking into consideration current developments in the Sahel, in particular in Mali and part of Nigeria, where armed groups claim to impose Islamic law, one realizes not only the ambivalence of religion in the public sphere, but also how democratization becomes a complex equation whenever claims of religiosity make their way into the public arena.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development of public Islam in Niger and its transformative effect on the society. Focusing on the emergence of an Islamic civil society and its interventions in the sector of Islamic learning, the paper shows how through Islam, religion and religiosity have become key players in the historical shifts that we observe in contemporary Nigerien urban society. Benefiting from a political reform context, Muslims initiate have introduce institutional changes and practices that further demonstrate the major role of religion in the emerging sociopolitical processes and dynamics. As a value system, a worldview and powerful ideological tool for the socialization of youth, Islam is used to promote a particular identity and citizenship. It is argued that unless we recognize this preeminent role of religion in current sociopolitical processes, we will fail to understand contemporary social dynamics not only in Niger or in the Muslim world, but also across the Global South.

KEYWORDS: Niger. Islam. Religion. Sociopolitical processes.

RESUMO

Este trabalho examina o desenvolvimento de políticas públicas do Islã na Nigéria e seu efeito transformador na sociedade. Centrando-se no surgimento de uma sociedade islâmica civil e as suas intervenções no setor da aprendizagem islâmica, o artigo mostra como, através do Islã, a religião e a religiosidade se tornaram jogadores-chave nas mudanças históricas que observamos na sociedade urbana contemporânea da Nigéria. Beneficiando de um contexto de reforma política, a iniciação dos muçulmanos tem introduzido mudanças institucionais e práticas que ainda demonstram o importante papel da religião nos processos sociopolíticos emergentes e dinâmicos. Como um sistema de valores, visão de mundo e uma ferramenta poderosa ideológica para a socialização da juventude, o Islã é utilizado para promover uma identidade e cidadania particulares. Argumenta-se que se não reconhecermos este papel proeminente da religião nos atuais processos sócio-políticos, vamos deixar de compreender a dinâmica social contemporânea não apenas na Nigéria ou no mundo muçulmano, mas também em todo o Sul Global.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Nigéria. Islã. Religião. Processos sociopolíticos.