The Association des Étudiants Musulmans du Niger (AEMN): Shaping Good Muslims, Producing a Muslim Elite
Islamic Activism in the Educational Landscape in Niger

Vincent Favier

Over the past three decades, African students have created several religious associations that reconfigured the social and political landscapes of sub-Saharan universities. Scholars often focused on this type of religious activism and yet didn't study the associations' educational agenda comprehensively. This article intends to fill this gap by examining the socioreligious activities of the Association des Étudiants Musulmans du Niger *(AEMN) and the impact of its educational discourse at the* Université Abdou Moumouni *(UAM) in Niamey, Niger. Mainly relying on empirical data gained through participant observation and interviews, it explores the ways the association pervades and shapes the educational landscape, notably by establishing partnerships beyond the university. The association's leaders, so it appears, promote an educational ethos that redefines the role of academia and its benefits for the Nigerien society. Correlating students' religiosity with academic performance, they try to reconcile Islamic values with scientific knowledge in the process of producing the future elites of the nation.*

Vincent Favier is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Freie-Universität Berlin and affiliated with the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin, Germany, where he is part of the Junior Research Project called Religion, Morality and Boko: Students Training for a Good Life (Remoboko). He holds a master's degree in African Studies from the Humboldt-Universität Berlin, for which he did a short documentary film on Wagogo's music traditions in Tanzania. His current research interests focus on the relationships between religiosity, knowledge, and performance among Muslims and Christians at the Université Abdou Moumouni in Niamey, Niger. He is currently planning a documentary film that illustrates these relationships and the social interactions on campus.

INTRODUCTION

F ive times a day, students come out of the lecture and student halls with their mat on their head, under their arm, sometimes holding a string of beads in the hand, other dressed in white *jellabiyas.* They buzz around the few watering places for their ablution and bunch into one of the several campus mosques or even pray outside in the sand. With a relative constancy, this customary ballet takes place before each prayer of the day and the night at the *Université Abdou Moumouni* (UAM), in Niamey, Niger. According to national statistics, 99% of the Nigerien population is Muslim.[1] This broad and visible commitment to Islam brings up questions about the role of the Islamic student associations on campus and how it affects academia.

Certainly, the *Association des Étudiants Musulmans du Niger / Section Université Abdou Moumouni* (AEMN/UAM) played a crucial role in these developments, but it must be contextualised within a broader process of "re-Islamisation" that has been affecting the whole Nigerien society since the early 1990s (Sounaye, 2016). Characterized by an increasing visibility of Islamic practices and discourses in the public sphere, the phenomenon reached the state and its institutions, including the UAM. This conquest of public space took the form of the construction of mosques and the creation of *makaranta* (Hausa: space of learning), especially in urban areas. Once delimitated by a few stones on the ground, mosques popped up in every faculty, surrounded the student halls, so that today, a student must hardly walk a few minutes to find a place of worship on campus.

This change may be surprising today when one knows that the UAM used to be a hotspot for Marxist-Leninist ideologies from its creation in 1971 throughout the 1990s (Smirnova, 2019). Obtaining its independence from France in 1960, the Republic of Niger largely adopted a constitution inherited from the French political system, applying de facto secular principles, *laïcité*, to all state institutions (Villalón & Bodian, 2020, p. 5). In a spirit of religious freedom, these principles would guarantee an equal treatment of all citizens before law and let people practice their religion as long as it doesn't disturb public order. This legacy from the French political system and academic culture remained uncontested until the 1990s, especially among students who largely endorsed a Marxist doctrine (Smirnova, 2019). In the 1970s and early 1980s, Niger experienced severe droughts, famines, and an

economic crisis that pushed Seyni Kountche's regime to take loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In turn, these institutions compelled the state to apply austerity measures in the public sector (Salifou, 2002, pp. 245–250), notably prioritizing investments in primary education at the expense of secondary and higher education (Villalón, et al., 2012, p. 20; Sounaye, 2020, p. 121).

In a context of authoritarian rule and deteriorated living conditions, social discontent and critiques of neo-imperialism grew. Standing together under the Marxist banner, students and trade unions initiated massive demonstrations. On February 9th, 1990, the security forces shot down three students, a drama that precipitated General Ali Saibou's fall and the organisation of the *conférence nationale souveraine* (national sovereign conference). Opened on July 29th, 1991, the conference paved the way to the democratisation and the liberalisation of the Nigerien society. Benefitting from this newly consecrated association and press freedom (Alidou, 2005, p. 152), a plethora of Islamic associations sprung up and flooded the public sphere with sermons (*wazi*)—also spreading on cassettes and DVDs —booklets, and all sort of commodity items, but also mosques, Islamic centres, Qur'anic schools, etc. (Alidou, 2005, p. 154, see also Sounaye, 2011). In the wake of a global Islamic revival, Islamic movements spread transnationally, especially Salafism that introduced new forms of religiosity across regions, often in opposition to Sufi traditions (Wiktorowicz, 2006, p. 210, see also Meijer, 2009). As one may observe in West Africa, a whole conglomerate of Islamic activists, preachers, entrepreneurs, and educators went public, preached, taught, moralised, reformed, in other words, started outreach activities to make Islam more accessible, encouraging the masses to learn, know and practice Islam better (Alidou, 2005, p. 153–154, Sounaye, 2009b).

These phenomena have attracted increasing scholarly attention on educational systems—both public and religious—across sub-Saharan Africa (see Abdurrahman & Canham, 1978, Brenner, 2000, Dilger & Schulz, 2013, Launay, 2016, Meunier, 1997, to name just a few). More recently, scholarly works have focused on higher education (see Assié-Lumumba, 2011, Blum et al., 2016, Lo & Haron, 2015), and especially religious manifestations in universities (see Gomez-Perez, 2008, Sounaye, 2018, Villalón & Bodian, 2020). Focusing mainly on the AEMN/UAM, I shed light on the values and skills conveyed through its educational discourse and on its networking and outreach strategy in the Nigerien educational landscape. This article intends to show that the Islamic activism on campus is the

expression of a social ethos that shapes students as new socio-religious models rather than an attempt to reform the educational system. To put it differently, it seeks to produce a morally trustworthy elite who would be balanced, that is equally performant academically, religiously conscious, and fit for the modern world's labour market. Beyond its educational project, the association established a network offering a social continuity and a religious community from school to professional life.

During several research stays in Niamey, Niger, from 2019 to 2021, I collected data through informal discussions with students and interviews with a few associations' members and leaders, and participant observations. Attending different activities organised by the AEMN/UAM on campus, I could listen to unaltered educational and Islamic speeches directly addressed to students. Ethnographic data also suggests that the Muslim students' religiosity is everything but homogenous and a challenge for Muslim leaders to impose a unified understanding and practice of Islam. What kind of activities does the AEMN/UAM organise on campus to reach out to students? What values and ethos does the association promote through its activities? How does the AEMN/UAM's networking strategy affect the educational landscape?

The first section will contextualise how the AEMN/UAM established on campus and tries to impose its understanding of Islam. Driven by a phenomenon of Islamisation of society and inspired by the Izala movement, the association has conquered this space in a few decades, judging by the religious practice of the students. The second section will outline some key aspects of the association's activities and analyse its educational discourse, which promote ethical values and a rationalistic approach on learning. Eventually, the third section will address the AEMN's networking strategy as it seeks to create a social continuity between the present and future elites of the nation. Subtly trying to link academic performance to Islamic moral values, the associations' agenda pursues its ideal to shape a new social elite whose success would benefit the whole society.

WINNING THE CAMPUS

One day, on the UAM campus, I was sitting on a bench at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and filming the afternoon prayer, *Asr*. Mohamed, a student, came up to me and said, "This is not what you think." Whatever he thought I was thinking, he insisted to talk to me about prayers and students' religiosity. Intrigued by this confidence, we convened to meet a few

days later for a formal interview. I asked him if filming students while they are praying could disturb them. "No" he answered, "a student wants to be called a Muslim. So, filming them would provide the evidence that they pray, so it's okay. There is a mass phenomenon and the look of others. Even though he doesn't want to go praying, he does go." He continued: "Some of my friends are not interested in religion. On Friday, everyone goes to the mosque, but during the week, far from it." This statement is intriguing because the five daily prayers seem to naturally set the pace on campus.

The performative and collective act of praying hides an unsuspected diversity among Muslim students regarding their religiosity and their background in Islamic knowledge. Baharou, a doctoral student in socio-anthropology,[2] confessed that he, like many other students, started consolidating his Islam only when he came to the university but a majority knows almost nothing about Islam.[3] As Villalón & Bodian rightly noted (2020, p. 2), universities are not disconnected from their social environments and reflect the society but they also have their own specific socio-religious dynamics. Taking this perspective into consideration is crucial to understand the circumstances under which Islam pervaded the university space in the 1990s and the current dynamics that shape the outreach strategy and educational discourse of the AEMN/UAM. The associations' leaders are indeed aware of this religiosity as *façade*, a problem they attribute in particular to the values transmitted by an education system that is still too secular in their eyes. In this sense, the association's activism on campus may be better understood as a continuation of the *Izala*'s educational reform.

In Niger, one of the most active and visible Islamic movements is known as the *Jama'at Izalatul Bidi'a wa Iqamatus Sunnah*, or *Izala*, which means "Assembly of people who remove the wrong innovations and stick to the prophetic tradition"[4] (Idrissa, 2018, p. 162). Inspired by Wahhabi-Salafi dogmas, the movement formed in Nigeria in the 1970s and spread to Niger in the 1980s (Loimeier, 2016, p. 201) to "purify" Islam from innovative practices (*bid'a*) that they consider esoteric, or even obscurantist, usually performed by Sufis (Sounaye, 2009b, p. 481). Promoting a strict orthopraxy, indeed rigorously based on what the Prophet said and did, and how he did it, the *Izala* followers cultivate piety as a social value. But they also stand against a "secular" model of education that they deem inauthentic, fake, deceitful (*boko*), and therefore created their own Islamic schools (*Islamiyya* schools) without the authorization of the government (Idrissa, 2018, pp. 174–177). Also mobilizing women for religious and political purposes, they led a social revolution (Loimeier, 2016, pp. 160–162). Education played a

crucial role in this endeavor (Sounaye, 2012a, p. 435) but was not limited to acquiring Islamic knowledge and used the same pedagogic methods as public schools (Meunier, 1997, pp. 165–167). Indeed, the Qur'an exhorts Muslims to seek knowledge, not only revealed knowledge but also knowledge from reason (Boyle, 2004, pp. 14–15).

One of the *Izalas'* remarkable features is their rationalistic attitude towards acquiring whatever knowledge may be useful to Muslims. Methodologically, this implies to move beyond a Eurocentric, secularist understanding and categorization of knowledge and to approach *Izala*'s rejection of a secular, Western model of education, not in terms of knowledge but in terms of values.

It appears that the AEMN's educational agenda and method echoes an *Izala*, Salafi-inspired ideology in many respects. Because the state never recognized the *Islamiyya* schools officially (Idrissa, 2018, pp. 176–177), only schoolchildren from the public educational system can enrol in public universities. As a result, many students at university have little Islamic knowledge and often settle for praying, partly because the schools' schedules and curriculum left little time and space to learn the Qur'an. Although its leaders reject any label and belonging to a religious movement, the AEMN was created as a national association with the objective to fill this gap in public universities.

In fact, the prayer phenomenon is relatively recent. A few decades ago, student activists and unionists fiercely advocated Marxist-Leninist ideologies (Smirnova, 2019) and didn't pay much attention to religion. Mohamed reported the words of one of his lecturers according to whom a good student didn't pray in his time. He smoked, drunk beer, adopted a "European" way of life that was once en vogue in the Nigerien academic environment. The former General Secretary of the *Union des Étudiants Nigériens à l'Université de Niamey* (UENUN) went even further by saying that students, especially activists, used to mock and scorn those who prayed, and reminded that women used to wear skirts and pants.[5] According to Mohamed, "today, a female student who would dress in a Western style would incur the risk to be called a whore."[6]

Islamic associations led an intensive outreach campaign and call to Islam (*da'wa*) in the Nigerien society that eventually pervaded the campus, one of the most symbolic bulwarks of secularism and Western culture in Niger (Idrissa, 2018, pp. 171–172). Founded in 1993, the *Association des Étudiants Musulmans à l'Université de Niamey* (AEMUN)[7] was the first Muslim student association at the university. During a conference on

campus,[8] the director of the AEMN's executive committee reminded the students about the historical context in which the association emerged:

> The ideological environment at the university was Marxist-Leninist and even Judaic. In our past, we are religious. We had a religious education within the family. But at the university you feel free, like a boss, and you allow yourself to do everything. Some said "we have a history, we are Muslims, we must preserve it." There were critiques towards those who prayed. They said it has not its raison d'être at the university.

This sentence grasps well the "enchantment" of West African campuses as leftist ideologies gradually lost ground to address global issues and social struggles since the end of the Cold War, as Magloire and Kaboré note beyond the case of Burkina Faso (Magloire & Kaboré, 2020, p. 38). Such Muslim students' associations may be found in several universities from Nigeria (Muslim Student Society of Nigeria) to Senegal (Association des Étudiants Musulmans de l'Université de Dakar).[9]

This "enchantment" materialized in the construction of mosques during the 1990s and the 2000s. This conquest of space is a hallmark of what Villalón and Bodian call the "disinhibition of the religious"[10] (2020, p. 24) in the public sphere. This "*décomplexion*" (disinhibition) as Idrissa calls it too (2005, p. 369), sometimes resulted in riots, for instance against the *Festival International de la Mode Africaine* in Niamey and Maradi in 2000, which led to the cancelation of the event and to the dissolution of the AEMUN with six other associations. In line with its "*méthodologie politique de l'équilibrisme*" towards Islamic actors (Idrissa, 2018, p. 180),[11] the state would eventually authorize the creation of the AEMN in 2007.[12]

Three authorities now compete at the UAM: the administration, the student union (UENUN), and the Muslim student association. In fact, the AEMN/UAM always maintained good relationships with the administration as successive rectors in the past decades were committed Muslims who eased the association's activities and projects on campus. The AEMN/UAM manages all campus mosques through their *da'wa* committees established in each faculty. At the faculty of economy, a tension occurred when the dean discovered that a mosque had been built without his prior authorization, and refused to connect the mosque to the campus' electricity network. But usually, requests to build a mosque in a faculty would come from the deans themselves, a fact that provokes criticism from a philosophy lecturer: "The board gets more requests to build mosques than seminar rooms!" a paradox to him as the university lacks capacity for hosting all the lectures. The power relationship between the UENUN and the

AEMN/UAM is also insightful, as both associations claim to represent the "students' material and moral interests." In fact, students' new religiosity has affected the student leaders' political discourses and positioning. Like at the state level, accusations of corruption made their way into the student union. Both political and student leaders, acknowledging the new moral framing of social expectations, started using religiosity as a political resource.

As the AEMN's director reminded at a conference, the *da'wa* didn't stop after the first Muslim student association had been dissolved. Understood as a "call to Islam," between an invitation to live according to the Qur'an and God's will and a moral reform, *da'wa* is first and foremost a proselytising action consisting in reminding others to pursue "greater piety in all aspects of their lives" (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 109). Although the AEMN's leaders still claim their "scrutiny right in current civil and society affairs" as political leitmotiv, their political experience in the public sphere turned short and obviously led them to go back to the roots of *da'wa* as a social activity. AEMN's emphasis on their educational mission may be read along those lines. In fact, developing this educational activism is very likely to be a political alternative through which one would reform the system from below.

On campus, the *da'wa* translated into a spatial and temporal conquest as well as a social and moral one. For instance, lectures too may be interrupted by *Dhuhr* and *Asr* prayers during the day. The Student Union now suspends its public meetings at prayer times because the audience would leave anyway. This reconfiguration of campus space and time makes it hard for anyone to skip a prayer. As Mohamed's opinion highlighted, students who overtly don't pray would face the remarks of others or may complicate their integration in a social environment that is new to many of them. On the other hand, some students are very eager to pray and don't hesitate to either leave the lecture hall or ask the lecturer if they may have a break, as soon as it is time to pray, an orthopraxis that creates sometimes frictions between students and lecturers.

As these few examples showed, religiosity has become central in social interactions between students, leaders, and lecturers. Islamic activism affected both the campus and academic life, changing the initial secular nature and understanding of this space within a short time. However, behind an apparent widely spread practice, students' religiosity is diverse and hides different levels of commitment to and knowledge of Islam. Islam may be used in socially determined ways that may be as superficial as exaggerated. Against this backdrop, the AEMN/UAM ambitions to transcend

individualism which may be seen as a Western value. As we will see in the next section, imparting a practically oriented knowledge of Islam is an attempt to educate students who are exposed to the values of a Western-inspired academic system but also to the vices of urban life.

BEING A GOOD STUDENT AND A GOOD MUSLIM

Studying at the UAM requires "patience and perseverance" said a speaker during a welcoming ceremony held in 2020, an advice heard over and over again on campus. Indeed, lecturers' strikes, student union's block-ades, and administrative delays disturb the academic year so that it often exceeds a calendar year. The lack of public expenditure combined with a constantly rising number of baccalaureate holders exacerbate the crisis of the Nigerien higher education system. According to students, the drop-out rate from the first to the second year is very high. Helping students psychologically, academically, sometimes financially is therefore a crucial aspect of the AEM/UAM's mission as a social actor on campus. On a Saturday morning, March 6th, 2021, a soft and melodious *dhikr* soared in the hazy sky over the campus, announcing that the AEMN's conference for welcoming the new student cohort was about to start in the *Al-Moustapha* mosque, the campus' main mosque. Roughly 100 male students—females sat in a separated room behind the main one—participated.

The speaker started off by praising Allah for his mercy and for having made today's gathering possible before announcing the program of the conference. The first topic, entitled "how to study successfully," would offer basic advice for students who discover the academic environment. The second topic would present the association and its mission. Eventually, the third topic would give a brief account of the university's history, of its organisation and faculties. The speaker, who now holds a master's degree in agronomy, is the former president of the *Club des Jeunes Musulmans* (CJM), an Islamic association for school students. His associative and academic paths illustrate the kind of social model the AEMN/UAM promotes to inspire students. He introduced his speech with some reflections about the notions of "success" and "happiness," suggesting that human beings engage with a quest of happiness in this life as well as in the afterlife. According to him, students face more difficulties today than in the past. Violence, laziness, indiscipline, strikes, cheating have become frequent hurdles that students need to overcome if they want to be successful, arguing that "self-confidence is important" because "one's way to act and to do may inspire other people

and become an example to follow." He asked the audience: "Why seeking to succeed?" "For the responsibility!" "For financial autonomy!" "For being useful to others!" a few students answer. "In fact," the speaker resumes, "succeeding leads to individual and collective success." He adds:

> For us as Muslims, succeeding is much more than graduating with honours, marry-ing the woman of one's choice, living in the most beautiful villa of the capital city, having the most expensive car in the world. For us as Muslims, succeeding means being a social model and a behavioural model.

This notion of model invariably refers to the Prophet Muhammad as the best model to follow (Sounaye, 2016, p. 94). Practical advice is not only aimed at improving one's academic performance but also religious practice. The association often warns its audience that succeeding should never be reduced to a matter of material comfort in this life. All efforts to succeed are vain if one loses sight of the purpose of life, which is to prepare for the afterlife. The Qur'an and the *hadiths* (the sayings and deeds of the Prophet) have provided the codes of conduct which, if followed and applied carefully, will open the gates of heaven. Thus, the associations' conferences often seek to share and explain these codes, attracting larger audiences of students who are keen to know what to do and how to do it. Acquiring a practical knowledge such as how to perform the Ramadan rightly seems much more valuable than knowing the different schools of Islamic juris-prudence among students. Key hadiths, citations from Muslim scholars, moralising stances and all kinds of advice and reminders widely circulate all day and night on social media. Because God and the Devil never sleep, the *da'wa* never stops, and students are encouraged to remind their brothers and sisters about good conduct as soon as they notice a wrong behaviour. In the student halls, it is known that some students drink alcohol but no one would dare doing it publicly. *Da'wa* may be effective but it also pushed certain practices seen as deviant into the private sphere.

However, students still have more freedom in the campus than in the city, and the AEMN/UAM is aware of this. Although the immense majority claims to be Muslim and to never skip a prayer, the attendance to the association's activities remains low in a university that counted over 25,000 students in 2019.[13] Hafiz, the vice-president of the AEMN on the national level, thinks that students may wrongly perceive the association as a mere structure of Islamic learning. Moreover, many students only come for lectures and don't live or hang out on the main campus. Strategically framed to attract more participants, the AEMN/UAM's most popular

activities are in fact those which impart concrete advices not only for succeeding in academia, but also for knowing what to do in everyday life situations without infringing Islamic rules.

Students experience the transition between youth and adulthood, new ways of living as many of them enjoy a new but fragile freedom and autonomy (Abbink & van Kessel, 2005), especially those living in the student halls, away from their family and the rather cumbersome conservative atmosphere of their neighbourhoods or villages. Campus life is thus an open door to all kind of deviances, from drinking and smoking to sexual promiscuity, and students, at this stage of their life, are subject to temptations. At the same time, Muslim leaders are very conscious that a general lack of optimism regarding future opportunities, socially and economically, may push students to an excessive religious practice and to fall into the trap of completely leaving their fate to the will of God. At the Café of the Faculty of Arts, a privileged space for all kind of discussions, debates, and gossips, students often criticise what they see as a fatalistic mode of thinking according to which everything that happens in life is God's will, and there is nothing else to do but pray to change one's destiny. Other students may visit Marabouts for solving all kinds of problems, from diseases to getting good grades. This is the kind of cultural practice that Muslim leaders consider un-Islamic as they encourage students to get rid of them.

These two illustrations of student behaviours are rather on the fringes of students' religiosity. Nevertheless, it highlights the diversity and the dynamics that the AEMN/UAM faces as its leaders seek to impose a rationalistic approach of living, learning, and practicing Islam on the one hand, and studying on the other. Beyond this comprehensive vision of Islam, the association members fight against what they consider to be immoral on two levels: On the institutional level first for being too secular and not bringing up students with enough ethical and moral values that would help break with the alleged endemic moral and economic corruption of State institutions, including the university. And, second, on the religious level against what they see as irrational customs, beliefs and practices that are not compliant with Islam. In that sense, the association's agenda is very much an educational project that tries to re-establish or institutionalise a social ethos based on Islamic values such as solidarity, accountability, collectiveness, humility, and piety. In order to achieve it, they encourage students to go back to the Qur'an and to the Sunna of the Prophet—as much as to their lecture notes—and to learn, a common stance in Muslim discourse in educational contexts across West Africa.[14]

Beyond a correct understanding of the Scripture, the association provides students with the right interpretation of the Word in any possible situation of everyday life as students' questions and concerns at the end of each conference highlight. A successful life is therefore a balanced life between the spiritual, the academic and the social spheres, on an individual level but which would benefit all. As the Prophet said in a hadith, "the best among you is the one who is the most useful to others."[15] For instance, AEMN/UAM's conference called "Academia and spirituality: how to find a balance?" is regularly scheduled and quite popular among students. At one of these conferences, *Oustaz* Laouli Salifou said: "Islam is the religion of the middle ground. Too much spirituality is extremism, too much pleasure too. The Muslim seeks the good life. He has an obligation to excel in academia as well as in the spiritual life."[16] Those who will attempt to find this balance will likewise become the type of virtuous citizens the association tries to shape or even to create.

In this context, the AEMN/UAM has been keen—and successful—to conquer a declining moral space that the student union failed to reinvent, and the university curricula and administration failed to produce. Critiques are directed to the administrative staff and its unreliable working hours, the lecturers cumulating positions and selfishly preventing students to access them, and the union's leaders for being more concerned with their own material interests than the students'. Positing that the moral interests should outweigh the material ones, the activities they offer and the topics they address intend to fill this void, which grew bigger as disoriented students looking for the next oasis in the academic desert kept on growing. The AEMN gained power on campus as an association that truly cares of the well-being of their "frères et soeurs" (brothers and sisters), an expression that stands in contrast with the Union's traditional yet faded "comrades."

The first university ever created in Niger, the UAM is still the main fabric of Nigerien elite and state officials (Sounaye, 2020, p. 120). While it remains a major institution in the higher educational landscape, it now competes with other public and private institutions of higher education, notably religious ones, a trend observable in many West African countries that face a crisis of their public educational system (Assié-Lumumba, 2011). Strategically networking, the AEMN established partnerships with two other Muslim associations: the CJM, present in public high schools, and the ANASI (Association Nigérienne pour l'Appel et la Solidarité Islamique - Nigerien Association for Islamic Call and Solidarity). The next section will

examine the activism of the AEMN beyond public universities and the nature of the partnerships it established with these associations as avenues to reach out to a growing number of students, but also to create, foster, and ensure a social continuity between current and potential future elites.

BEYOND CAMPUS: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND THE FORMATION OF A MUSLIM ELITE

The aim of this section is to address the way the AEMN relates to these other associations and to private higher educational institutions as a wider strategy to become a central Islamic actor in the Nigerien educational landscape. As we shall see, this partnership develops an inter-generational network that may ease the training and integration of a Muslim elite in the making. From the independence in 1960 to the democratisation and liberalisation of society in the 1990s, the Nigerien state authorized only one national Islamic association in its attempt to promote Islam and to keep it under control at the same time (Idrissa, 2018, pp. 159–161). With the advent of freedom of the press and association in 1991, this situation changed, opening up new avenues for civil society actors to exercise their citizenship.

Created and recognised by the state in 1991, the ANASI is the association of the intellectual francophones. It targets an educated elite to protect them from the "harmful influence of the materialist culture"[17] (Hassane, 2005, p. 142), especially the state officials who have been mostly trained in a secular educational system (Sounaye, 2012b, p. 240). In fact, *Izala* activists tried to influence the debates of the Sovereign National Conference in 1991, by creating a political party first, and then an Islamic association, the ANASI (Idrissa, 2018, pp. 169–170). Being politically hindered by the successive regimes throughout the 1990s, they reoriented their Islamisation efforts towards the public sphere, which they tried to represent broadly, including students. Created in 1993, the first Muslim student association, the AEMUN, had the objective to "complement the moral and spiritual education of students in general."[18] After its dissolution in 2001, its leaders wanted to create an association encompassing all Nigerien schoolchildren and students, but eventually, the AEMN represented only the university students when it was created, or re-authorized, in 2007. As a significant number of associations had been set up and recognised by the state in the 1990s, the CJM emerged in the 2000s with the ambition to be exclusively dedicated to schoolchildren but also to be more autonomous and

independent from "mother associations" established on the national level, like the ANASI. These trajectories and associational experiences show how different social groups became Islamic actors in their own right. They did not only reconfigure the field of Islamic activism towards meeting a social demand more accurately but also appropriated Islam, at their level, in the wake of the democratisation of Islamic knowledge.

On a structural level, it seems that the public education system influenced this reconfiguration too. Instead of a competition, the collaboration between these three entities came out in a rather informal way amid the reorganisation of the socio-political sphere in a context of sudden liberalisation and democratisation. Indeed, it seems that the emergence of several CJM in the 2000s pushed the AEMN to limit its scope of intervention to university students. The same can be said from the ANASI that used to encompass francophone, educated Nigeriens but is now rather dedicated to state officials and employees of the private sector.[19] However, youth still need advices from those who have some experience, thus active members of the AEMN and the ANASI would intervene as "grand frères" (elder brothers) within the schools' CJM. In turn, active members of the CJM would be keen to take functions in the AEMN and ANASI as they progress, move on to the university and eventually start their professional career. Although the AEMN's vice-president admits that a few defections occur, it is nevertheless the way the AEMN envisions this cooperation that grew into a socio-religious network rapidly.[20]

Education has always been a common thread to the three associations, which share the same objective to democratise the Qur'an and the Sunna and disseminate Islamic values to an educated fringe of the population who would supposedly lack Islamic knowledge and practice. As Sounaye argues,

> The "Yan Lakkol" (the Schooled, from Hausa) or "Intellectuals," as this social category is called, are portrayed as lacking the knowledge of Islam, but also as an obstacle to Islam if they are not provided the light of adini (religion). The reason Islamic organizations advance include the elite status of this social category and their influence in the everyday life of the state. Therefore, in order to overcome this obstacle, early on, ANASI chose to focus on "enlightening" the "Intellectuals," creating various form for "training" in Islamic culture and values. (2009a, p. 52)

In fact, the Islamic reformist movement's rationalistic approach towards knowledge and education is less an attempt to Islamise knowledge than an adaptation to the secular-religious divide brought up by a Western modernity. This integration supposes that reformist Muslims relate to this modernity in a way that refills Islam with an updated content and sense.[21] This is, in essence, perceptible in Muslim leaders' discourses at

the UAM, who often say that everything, every answer to one's questions in this life and regarding the afterlife can be found in the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. In this backdrop, many activities organised by the associations, especially the CJM and AEMN, are dedicated to give practical advice to students, who are not short of questions about life, studies, sexuality, marriage, Ramadan, etc. Times change rapidly and Muslim leaders constantly seek to make their interpretation of divine messages resonate in present circumstances, which, in turn, inevitably shape their understanding of these messages too. As Muslim scholars and educators, their religious and social position requires them to provide an answer to all questions. Although the AEMN often invites Islamic scholars of varying ages, they may find adequate interlocutors among the ANASI members and supporters who were themselves students, know the educational system, and participated in the associative life within the CJM and AEMN. As they became professionally successful later, they may be social models to follow for the young generations.

For Hafiz, the strength of the collaboration between the three associations is based on sharing as a value:

> There is also this educational character, this sharing character. It is better to have a framework to promote Islamic values, organising preaching or support activities such as charity work. Civil servants earn a little and can help the needy. We consult them on possible activities if needed. They have experience in business circles. They are mainly involved in social activities.[22]

Although the three associations meet only once a year to discuss their collaboration and possible upcoming events, this partnership is rather designed to ensure a dialogue and a continuity between an educated youth, that is an elite in the making, and an established one. Often, guest speakers at AEMN and CJM's conferences and activities have been active members of one or both associations in the past. What they share is not only their knowledge of Islam but also their own experience as former students, association members, and workers.

Through its ambition to represent all Nigerien Muslim students, the AEMN tries to reach out to more students by establishing partnerships with private universities too. Indeed, the UAM is not the only site of training anymore, as several private higher educational institutions, notably religious ones, were created to meet the growing demand for education on the higher education market. This trend is observable in many other regions in sub-Saharan Africa (Assié-Lumumba, 2011, p. 178, Dilger & Schulz, 2013, p. 370). Following a similar policy implemented to counter the rise of *Islamiyya* schools, the Nigerien state decided to stop giving

new accreditations to all private universities, Islamic or not.[23] While the Nigerien government needed new educational actors to reduce its financial burden and absorb a growing number of students (Alidou, 2005, p. 75), it faces at the same time a proliferation of higher education institutions that threaten its traditional monopoly and control over the formation of citizens.

The AEMN developed a partnership with about ten institutions of higher education in Niamey and Zinder.[24] The association did not open branches in the partner institutes but organises Islamic conferences regularly. Tapping into its own network of Muslim scholars, the AEMN may program for instance *Oustaz Bizo*, specialist in afterlife issues, at the UAM shortly before Ramadan and a few weeks later at the IPHEC during Ramadan (Institut Privé des Hautes Études Commerciales–Private Institute of Higher Trade Studies). After his talk at the IPHEC, a collective fast-breaking would be organised for the students of the school, a widespread event in many educational institutions. To summarize, the AEMN's strategy in the educational sphere may be seen on two axes: a horizontal one through which the association tries to reach out to as many students as possible, both in the public and the private sectors. And a vertical one, through which Muslim leaders establish ties with cadets and elders in a way that may ease the exchange of knowledge and experiences but also contribute to creating a sense of community and a path for those who wish to engage lastingly in Islamic activism. This all-encompassing strategy has made the AEMN a full-fledged player in the Nigerien educational landscape.

CONCLUSION

Ocaya-Lakidi and Mazrui argued, in the case of colonial and missionary schools in Uganda, that educational institutions and their curriculum convey a specific ethos, and a set of techniques and social values (Ocaya-Lakidi & Mazrui 1975, p. 278). Yet what we observe today at the UAM is rather an attempt at synthesis between a curriculum that is still largely inspired by a Western academic culture, which teaching language is French, and social values that are more in line with an Islamic and Nigerien culture. In this sense, it shows that the university, as Villalón and Bodian (2020) argued, has its own dynamics while it remains connected to its social environment. Both the local and global contexts have drastically changed in the past decades, and apparently much faster than the university itself. The social transformation of the campus that occurred recently perhaps augurs a coming transformation of the whole Nigerien academia. For now, Islamic discourse on campus seems to settle for using

the tools that the academia offers because they are still the best suited for the Nigerien economic, political, and judicial system. Instead of trying to change the system, wrapping it with the social and religious values it fails to convey is a way to reform the educational standards towards the formation of a Muslim elite and a redefinition of citizenship. In the conception of education of French enlightenment thinkers such as Condorcet and Rousseau, what individuals would learn at school is supposed to *educate* them, that is to pull them out, emancipate them, make them free and responsible citizens. For a number of historical, political, and social reasons that I have partly outlined in this article, the Nigerien schooling system had produced only an elite of rulers whose values reflected this alien model of education. Muslim critics towards this educational system begun long before independence for producing areligious or even anti-Islamic subjects (Salifou, 2002, p. 115). In this sense, it is not surprising that Islamic activism started targeting this social category and reforming individuals rather than the whole educational system. Yet this reform has been hindered or slowed down by the state. It seems now that Islamic actors, acknowledging their limits to revolutionize the system, changed their approach. Adopting a rationalistic attitude towards using the existing institutions of education, they infiltrated them and work as a balance to the values it entails and that they now consider as insufficient rather than inappropriate or harmful.

In an educational sphere that was criticised for lacking Islamic values, the AEMN's activism highly contributed to fill the secular void in terms of religious practice. However, transmitting values of piety, honesty, responsibility, and collectiveness entailed in Islamic knowledge and moralising individuals' behaviours seems a longer way off. Caught in a rationalistic approach on knowledge and practice, this Salafi-inspired understanding of Islam may be seen as a reaction to and a product of modernity that manifests through more visibility and orthopraxy among the masses at the expense of a critical engagement with spirituality. In this backdrop, one witnesses a superposition of different values that Muslim leaders seek to reconcile under a unique, overarching social ethos, and therefore try to reform the students as Muslims rather than the Nigerien higher educational system.

Notes

1. See INS-Niger 2015: 44.

2. At the UAM, sociology and anthropology are one department that is thus named like this.

3. Interview with Baharou, 19.01.2021.

4. My translation.

5. Interview with Mahamadou, former UENUN's General Secretary, 21.05.2021.

6. Interview with Mohamed, 05.05.2021.

7. Muslim Students Association at the University of Niamey, my translation.

8. The conference took place on March 6th, 2021. It was a welcoming conference to the new student cohort and gave an overview of the activities and results of its current executive committee.

9. See respectively Balogun 2019 and Gomez-Perez 2008.

10. My translation.

11. "Political methodology of balancing," my translation.

12. According to the historical account given on their website, the AEMN was created in 2007 but officially recognised by the government by decree on April 10th, 2010.

13. Source: Service de la scolarité, UAM.

14. See for instance Balogun 2019, Villalòn & Bodian 2020.

15. Reported by Daraqutni, this hadith was cited in a speech before students that a candidate running for the election of a new executive committee at the student union pronounced on December 4th, 2019.

16. Conference held at the UAM on November 25th, 2020.

17. My translation.

18. http://aemn-niger.org/, accessed on 28.07.2022.

19. My Nigerien interlocutors would often use the word "fonctionnaire" (lit. state official, civil servant) in a broad sense including all people who work in offices, not only for the state but also for private companies.

20. Interview with Hafiz, 17.10.2021.

21. For a broader debate on the question of Islam and modernity in Niger, see Sounaye 2016.

22. Interview with Hafiz, 17.10.2021.

23. Interview with Prof. Alpha Gado, 29.03.2021.

24. For an exhaustive list, see the list on the website http://aemn-niger.org/index.php#team, accessed on 28.07.2022.

References

Abbink, J., & van Kessel, I. (Eds.). (2005). *African dynamics: Vol. 4. Vanguard or vandals: Youth, politics, and conflict in Africa*. Brill.

Abdurrahman, A. M., & Canham, P. (1978). *The ink of the scholar: The Islamic tradition of education in Nigeria. Basic books in education*. Macmillan Nigeria.

Alidou, O. D. (2005). *Engaging modernity: Muslim Women and the politics of agency in postcolonial Niger*. University of Wisconsin Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/huberlin-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3444762

Assié-Lumumba, N. T. (2011). Higher education as an African public sphere and the university as a site of resistance and claim of ownership for the national project, N'Dri T. *Africa Development*, *36*(2), 175–206.

Balogun, A. (2019). "When Knowledge is there, Other Things Follow": The Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria and the Making of Yoruba Muslim Youths. *Islamic Africa*, *10*(1–2), 127–152. https://doi.org/10.1163/21540993-01001005

Blum, F., Guidi, P., & Rillon, O. (Eds.). (2016). *Histoire contemporaine : Vol. 16. Étudiants africains en mouvements : Contribution à une histoire des années 1968*. Publications de la Sorbonne.

Boyle, H. N. (2004). *Quranic schools: Agents of preservation and change. Reference books in international education*. Routledge Falmer.

Brenner, L. (2000). *Controlling knowledge: Religion, power and schooling in a West African Muslim society*. Hurst.

Dilger, H., & Schulz, D. (2013). Politics of religious schooling: Christian and Muslim engagements with education in Africa. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, *43*(4), 365–378. https://doi.org/10.1163/15700666-12341262

Gomez-Perez, M. (2008). The Association des Étudiants Musulmans de l'Université de Dakar (AEMUD) between the Local and the Global: An Analysis of Discourse. *Africa Today*, *54*(3), 94–117. https://doi.org/10.2979/AFT.2008.54.3.94

Hassane, S. (2005). Mouvances islamiques et demande d'ouverture démocratique au Niger. *Esprit, 317* (8–9), 138–146. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24470401

Hirschkind, C. (2006). *The ethical soundscape: Cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics. Cultures of history*. Columbia University Press.

Idrissa, A. (2005). Modèle islamique et modèle occidental : Le conflit des élites au Niger. In M. Gomez-Perez (Ed.), *Hommes et sociétés. L'islam politique au sud du Sahara : Identités, discours et enjeux* (pp. 347–372). Karthala.

Idrissa, A. (2018). *Islam et politique au Sahel : Entre persuasion et violence*. EPGA.

INS-Niger (2015). État et structure de la population du Niger en 2012. https://stat-niger.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ETAT_STRUCTURE_POPULATION.pdf, accessed on 31.05.2022.

Magloire, S., & Kaboré, K. (2020). Entre activisme post-colonialiste et réveil du religieux : le campus universitaire de Ouagadougou. In L. A. Villalón & M. Bodian (Eds.), *Entre le savoir et le culte : Activisme et mouvements religieux dans les universités du Sahel* (pp. 23–54). Amalion.

Launay, R. (Ed.). (2016). *Islamic education in Africa: Writing boards and blackboards*. Indiana University Press.

Lo, M., & Haron, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Muslim institutions of higher education in postcolonial Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Loimeier, R. (2016). *Islamic reform in twentieth-century Africa*. Edinburgh University Press.

Meijer, R. (2009). *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement*. Hurst.

Meunier, O. (1997). *Dynamique de l'enseignement islamique au Niger : Le cas de la ville de Maradi. Études africaines*. l'Harmattan.

Ocaya-Lakidi, D., & Mazrui, A. M. (1975). Secular skills and sacred values in Uganda schools: Problems of technical and moral acculturation. In G. N. Brown & M. Hiskett (Eds.), *Studies on modern Asia and Africa. Conflict and harmony in education in tropical Africa* (pp. 278–295). Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Salifou, A. (2002). *Le Niger*. L'Harmattan.

Smirnova, T. (2019). Student activism in Niger: subverting the 'limited pluralism', 1960–83. *Africa*, *89*(S1), S167-S188. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972018000967

Sounaye, A. (2009a). Ambiguous secularism: Islam, Laïcité and the state in Niger. *Civilisations*, *58*(2), 41–57.

Sounaye, A. (2009b). Izala au Niger: Une alternative de communauté religieuse. In L. Fourchard, O. Goerg, & M. Gomez-Perez (Eds.), *Lieux de sociabilité urbaine en Afrique* (pp. 481–500). L'Harmattan.

Sounaye, A. (2011). La « discothèque » islamique : CD et DVD au cœur de la réislamisation nigérienne. *Ethnographiques.org* (22-mai 2011, Les outils d'un islam en mutation. Réislamisation et moralisation au sud du Sahara). https://www.ethnographiques.org/2011/Sounaye

Sounaye, A. (2012a). Heirs of the Sheikh Izala and its appropriation of Usman Dan Fodio in Niger (Les héritiers du cheikh Izala et ses appropriations d'Usman Dan Fodio au Niger). *Cahiers D'études Africaines*, *52*(206/207), 427–447. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41708183

Sounaye, A. (2012b). Les Clubs des Jeunes Musulmans du Niger. Un cadre de formation et un espace intergénérationnel. In M. Gomez-Perez, M. N. LeBlanc, & C. Coquery-Vidrovitch (Eds.), *L'afrique des générations: Entre tensions et négociations* (pp. 217–258). Karthala. https://www.cairn.info/l-afrique-des-generations--9782811106317-page-217.htm

Sounaye, A. (2016). *Islam et modernité : Contribution à l'analyse de la ré-islamisation au Niger*. L'Harmattan.

Sounaye, A. (2018). Salafi youth on campus in Niamey, Niger: moral motives, political ends. In E. Oinas, H. Onodera, & L. Suurpää (Eds.), *Youth in a globalizing world: volume 6. What politics? Youth and political engagement in Africa* (pp. 209–229). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004356368_014

Sounaye, A. (2020). "Les étudiants aussi sont des enfants de Dieu" : La religiosité à l'université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey. In L. A. Villalón & M. Bodian (Eds.), *Entre le savoir et le culte: Activisme et mouvements religieux dans les universités du Sahel* (pp. 115–144). Amalion.

Villalón, L. A., & Bodian, M. (Eds.). (2020). *Entre le savoir et le culte : Activisme et mouvements religieux dans les universités du Sahel*. Amalion.

Villalón, L., Idrissa, A., & Bodian, M. (2012). Religion, demande sociale, et réformes éducatives au Niger : Quand l'Etat redynamise l'école franco-arabe, réorganise les écoles «Islamiyya," et essaie de capturer les écoles coraniques. *Afrique: Pouvoir Et Politique (APP)*.

Wiktorowicz, Q. (2006). Anatomy of the Salafi movement. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *29*(3), 207–239. https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004