

## ISLAM AND THE IDENTITY OF MERCHANTS IN MARADI (NIGER)

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My research among the Hausa in Maradi (Niger) and then in Kano (northern Nigeria) initially adopted a historical perspective to examine how local merchants and entrepreneurs accumulated wealth.<sup>1</sup> In the framework of a study on border exchanges in West Africa, I then analyzed formal and informal trade between Niger and Nigeria. Very active underground trading patterns and smuggling networks, wherein several actors (runners, transporters and customs officers) are implicated, were thus brought to light between traders in Maradi and Kano.<sup>2</sup>

This research on the business world did not pay sufficient attention to a factor that carries heavy weight in Hausa areas, namely Islam. Here I hope to make up for this shortcoming by showing how closely Islam and trade are interrelated in the city of Maradi, where I recently undertook fieldwork on this topic. The objective is to understand how Islam has enabled merchants to work out a sense of identity.<sup>3</sup>

### *Maradi: the historical background*

Maradi had its origins in a religious movement when, in the early nineteenth century, Usman Dan Fodio and his followers launched a *jihad* against the Hausa and Borno dynasties of present-day northern Nigeria. The movement succeeded in capturing control of much of Hausaland and neighbouring regions and in establishing a Muslim state, the Sokoto Caliphate. At the northern edge of the Caliphate, Maradi was a place of refuge for the *sarki* (ruler) of Katsina, who sought to reconquer the capital whence his ancestors had been chased away by the *jihad*. At his side were the Hausa rulers of Kano and

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<sup>1</sup> See E. Grégoire, *The Alhazai of Maradi: Traditional Hausa Merchants in a Changing Sahelian City* (Boulder, Colorado, 1992), and E. Grégoire, "Formation d'un capitalisme africain. Le alhazai de Kano," in C. Blanc-Pamard (ed.), *La dimension économique* (Paris, 1990), pp.149-61.

<sup>2</sup> E. Grégoire, "Les chemins de la contrebande," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* (Paris) forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> See also, E. Grégoire, "Accumulation marchande et propagation de l'Islam en milieu urbain. Le cas de Maradi (Niger)", *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* (Paris), no. 5 (1991), pp.43-55.

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Jobir, who wanted to regain control of their own city-states. Although these princes never achieved their aims, Maradi remained for much of the nineteenth century a stronghold that warred against the Fulani emirs of Katsina and Kano.

During the colonial period, this small fortified town became an administrative centre and, during the heyday of groundnut production, a trading centre. From *chef-lieu* of a *cercle* in colonial times, Maradi has now become a *préfecture*. Meanwhile, trade with neighbouring Nigeria (Kano is only 220 km. away) had stimulated growth. The city now has more than 120,000 inhabitants – and its share of urban problems (food shortfalls, delinquency, population growth, and so on). During the 1970s, an unsuccessful attempt was made at industrialization. Above all else, Maradi is a border city with an economy based on an intense circulation of money rather than the creation of wealth.

Thanks to the groundnut trade and, later, the growth of commerce with Nigeria, a group of wealthy merchants has emerged. These men are imbued with the values of merchant capitalism and of Islam, as their name *alhazai* (singular: *alhaji*) indicates: it is the Hausa title given to Muslims who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. In the process of accumulating their wealth, these *alhazai* have also supported the diffusion of Islam in Maradi. For them, the title of *alhaji* is a way of identifying themselves as members of a local élite. Formerly, adherence to Islam was a symbol of one's élite status, and in recent years a new generation of young traders has joined the reformist religious movement, *Izala*, which might be interpreted as yet another new way for a portion of the merchant class to assert its separate identity.

#### *Accumulation and the spread of Islam*

Islam has been implanted in several African societies, especially those where trade is important. For several centuries, through trans-Saharan commerce, some traders entered into contact with Arab merchants and then converted to Islam. During their travels, they helped to spread the new religion south of the Sahara.<sup>4</sup> For instance, merchants from Katsina and Kano, who during the pre-colonial period had constant contacts with fellow-merchants in north African cities (such as Tripoli, Benghazi and Algiers) had an active part in diffusing Islam among the Hausa.

The Maradi area was not safe for travellers until the coming of the European powers in the early twentieth century, when Hausaland was

<sup>4</sup>C. Meillassoux, "Introduction" in C. Meillassoux (ed.), *L'évolution du commerce en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Oxford, 1971), pp.3-48.

divided between France and Britain. With hostilities in the region ended, people could move about without fear, for business as well as religious reasons. Trade as well as Islam could flourish. Small caravans from Maradi would sell animals and skins in Kano and then return loaded with cloth and kola nuts. Traveling to improve their knowledge of the Qur'an, *marabouts* from Maradi would spend time in the British-controlled cities of northern Nigeria. Kano, Zaria, Sokoto and Maiduguri were highly regarded as centres of Qur'anic study. Maradi itself, with a population of only 4,500 inhabitants in 1911, was still a small town where animism was strong. Only the chief and his advisers, as well as a few families of clerics from the old city-state of Katsina, were Muslim.

Following World War I, France introduced an economy based on exporting local products (groundnuts) and importing merchandise. Here, as in the rest of the colonial empire, new markets were thus opened for the mother country's industries. To reach local consumers and producers (i.e. peasants), colonial trading houses used African middlemen, who both collected groundnuts and sold tradé articles. From the 1950s until the Great Drought of 1973-4, the groundnut trade boomed. More and more African traders were taken up in it; and some of them became middlemen so rich they formed a small local business élite. Exposed to influences from Nigeria, these merchants gradually converted to Islam. A *marabout* spoke about this,

"When merchants from Maradi went to Nigeria on business, they saw how their contacts there practised religion (prayer, etc.) and then participated with them. When they came back to Niger, they changed their customs and religious beliefs. They led the men who worked with them to pray to God. That's how Islam replaced traditional religions."

Authors like Meillassoux, Hopkins and Hiskett<sup>5</sup> have emphasized how closely Islam and trade have been linked, and how the former has so often served as a vehicle for the latter in West Africa. As trade grew and the local economy became increasingly dependent on money, Islam was probably better suited than traditional religions for regulating social and economic relations. For merchants, becoming Muslim may have been a way of standing out (like the chief) from the ordinary people.

Thanks to their wealth and subsequently to air transportation, more and more merchants in Maradi were going on pilgrimage to

<sup>5</sup>See C. Meillassoux, *ibid.*; A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York, 1980); and M. Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (London, 1984).

Mecca, whence they returned with the prestigious title *alhaji*. Among the Hausa, this title also signifies success in business; through it these merchants identified themselves as members of the local business élite. Impelled by the *alhazai*, Islam gained ground in Maradi, and since 1970 it seems to have outstripped traditional religions.

Meanwhile, the growth of trade with Nigeria has considerably improved business for the Maradi *alhazai*. It produced a new generation of men who are more modern and businesslike than those involved in the groundnut trade. Although their main business is still trading, in particular the import-export trade with Nigeria, these merchants are also investing in buildings, transportation, farming, livestock and even industry.

These *alhazai* devote part of their earnings to spreading Islam: they provide *marabouts* with the means of opening Qur'anic schools, they help build mosques so that the faithful will have a place of worship, and they fund pilgrimages to Mecca for family members and close friends. As one *marabout* pointed out to me, they are "following the example of Siddiq Abubakar, a well-to-do person who provided material support to the Prophet for spreading Islam." Although the *alhazai* have done much to help propagate Islam in the Maradi area, Islamization is a fundamental trend in local society. As this society undergoes change, it is looking for new frames of reference and systems of thought so as to be able to cope with the changing social and economic environment.

As the city has been Islamized, these wealthy merchants are still trying to maintain a sense of separate identity. Formerly, this status was achieved by simple adherence to Islam, by being a Muslim. Then, for a long period, the performance of the pilgrimage and the acquisition of the *alhaji* title served a similar purpose, although nowadays this title is borne by so many people that it no longer functions as a sign of distinction. It would seem that now membership in the reformist religious movement called *Izala* has become a means for young, wealthy *alhazai* to develop their own unique sense of identity. Before we comment on this movement, a brief history of major Islamic groups in Maradi is in order. Attention will be focused on differences between these groups (in doctrine as well as religious practices) and on the social repercussions of these differences.

#### *The Sufi brotherhoods*

There are two major brotherhoods among Hausa Muslims: the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya. In Maradi, Islam was first present in the form of the Qadiriyya, which was introduced into the region by the

Kunta Shaikh Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kabir (1729/30-1811).<sup>6</sup> Usman Dan Fodio belonged to this brotherhood, as did the Wangarawa, an important merchant group from Mali which played a significant role in the early Islamic history of Hausaland, particularly in Katsina. Nowadays, more people in Maradi belong to this brotherhood than to any other, including some of the city's most prominent *marabouts*, including Mallam Antoma (*imam* at the mosque on Place du Chef and president of the local *marabouts'* association) and Mallam Abba (*imam* of the new Friday mosque in Zaria quarter). Most of the wealthiest *alhazai* also belong to the Qadiriyya. In Maradi, members of the Qadiriyya are referred to as *sadalu*, a term which refers to the fact that they pray with their arms at their sides.

The Tijaniyya brotherhood was founded in Algeria by Shaikh Ahmad Tijani in the eighteenth century, and spread to West Africa in the mid-nineteenth century through the activities of al-Hajj 'Umar Tal, who himself led a *jihad* in the regions of present-day Senegal and Mali.<sup>7</sup> The Tijaniyya, whose practices tend to be mystical, did not appear in Maradi until the mid-1950s, when it was introduced by members of its Niassiyya branch from Kano, where the Emir is an adherent of the order.<sup>8</sup> The Niassiyya branch of the Tijaniyya is based in Senegal, and its members pray with their arms crossed on their chests, for which reason they are referred to as *kabalu*. In Maradi, Mallam Ibrahim dan Jirataoua heads this brotherhood, and a few wealthy merchants support it.

The observable differences between *kabalu* and *sadalu* all relate to ritual, in particular to praying. In addition to differing positions of the arms during prayer,<sup>9</sup> the *kabalu* (Niassiyya Tijanis) recite certain Tijani litanies in groups, such as the daily *wazifa* and the *hadra* on Fridays. Although serious clashes took place between these two brotherhoods in Nigeria during the 1950s and 1960s, their members are now working together, in Maradi as in Nigeria, to oppose the *Izala* fundamentalists.

<sup>6</sup>J.-L. Triaud, "Le thème confrérique en Afrique de l'Ouest," in A. Popovic and G. Veinstein (eds), *Les ordres mystiques dans l'Islam* (Paris, 1986), pp.271-81.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>O. Kane, "La confrérie Tijaniyya Ibrahima de Kano et ses liens avec la Zawiya mère de Kaolack," *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* (Paris), no. 3 (1989), pp. 27-40.

<sup>9</sup>For a doctrinal discussion of this issue, see the chapter in this book by Muhammad Sani Umar, note 27.

*The Izala movement*

The *Jama'at izarat al-bid'a wa iqamat al-sunna* (Movement for Suppressing Innovations and Restoring the Sunna) was founded in Jos, Nigeria, in 1978 by Isma'il Idris, a former career soldier, with the support of Shaikh Abubakar Gumi, who had close ties with Saudi Arabia. Despite difficulties, *Izala* has managed to establish itself in many northern Nigerian cities,<sup>10</sup> whence it is now spreading to Maradi.

The *Izala's* success has riled both the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya. Major *marabout* families in Maradi oppose these reformers, who dare to challenge their power and criticize the holiness of their religious practices. Tension between, on the one hand, *Izala* members and, on the other, the *kabalu* and *sadalu* (joined together under the circumstances) reached such a point that the prefect and mayor summoned representatives on 5 November 1990, "to promote understanding and calm tempers." After a long, "very lively" debate, participants agreed to observe a few rules, in particular: not to preach sermons in public, not to sell cassettes of sermons, not to listen to such cassettes in the mosques, and not to go preaching from village to village. The religious peace following this meeting did not last long.

The *yan izala*, as they are called in Hausa, act like new "jihadists." Advantageously combining religion with business and social affairs, their doctrine is an ideology "tailor-made to fit" young, rich *alhazai*.<sup>11</sup> The *Izala* preach an authentic Islam and forbid the surviving beliefs and customs of traditional religions. A *marabout* told me,

"We must fight animism and those who interpret the Qur'an improperly and do not practise it as it was written by the Prophet. We must get rid of the additions [innovations not prescribed in the Qur'an] and of the intermediaries between God, the Prophet and mankind. By installing intermediaries, the *sadalu* and *kabalu* have acted like animists, who saw spirits (*iskoki*) as intermediaries for communicating with the gods."

As this fierce attack against the Islamic brotherhoods indicates, there are major doctrinal disagreements between them and the *Izala*.<sup>12</sup> But the disagreement is not just doctrinal: it also reaches out into practices (the scheduling and length of daily prayers, distinct places of worship etc.). In this respect the *Izala* movement, like Wahhabism in

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>This is how J.-L. Amselle has described similar developments in Bamako, Mali. See Amselle, "Bamako s'arabise" in the special issue "Capitales de la couleur" of *Autrement* (Paris), 9 Oct. 1984, pp. 192-7.

<sup>12</sup>O. Kane, "Les mouvements religieux et le champ politique au Nigeria septentrional. Le cas du réformisme musulman à Kano." *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* (Paris), no. 4 (1990), pp. 7-24.

Mali, can be said to be fundamentally opposed to the religious practices of the *marabouts*. Its followers criticize *marabouts* for their power and occult practices, for their quackery and for dealing in amulets and charms (still used in Maradi for obtaining success in work, business or love and for healing purposes). They condemn the *marabouts* as parasites living on society through such heathen practices.

Young merchants who are part of the *Izala* movement no longer send their children to Qur'anic schools. Instead, they have set up *madrasas* (known locally in French as *médersas*) for modern education in Arabic. During an interview, Alhaji Dan Tchadaoua, leader of the *Izala* in Maradi (and a rich importer-exporter), insisted on the need to develop education "which must be at the base of Islam." He criticized his elders, the wealthy *alhazai* of the 1970s and 1980s, who "put the cart before the horse" by building mosques all over the city instead of opening *madrasas* and covering the costs of teachers there. Instead of offering pilgrimages to Mecca, he continued, they should have provided material assistance to help people develop their businesses so that they could later pay for pilgrimages out of their own pockets.<sup>13</sup> Members of *Izala* advocate limiting the often considerable sums spent on marriages (dowries) and baptisms, charging that such expenses are a waste of money.

*Izala* represents the emergence of a new expression of Islam in Maradi, which is supported by a new generation of *alhazai*, whose conceptions of society and social relations differ from those of their elders. In their eyes Hausa society is too hierarchical, and consequently they challenge the power and authority of the elders. For example, they do not kneel in the presence of their father, mother, father-in-law, mother-in-law or any other person who must be respected because of age or social status. Traditionalists castigate them for breaking customs of this sort.

As has long been the case among wealthy Hausa families, however, the wives of these fundamentalists are supposed to live in seclusion at home; they may go out only if they wear a black veil and are dressed properly.

Many of these *alhazai* are the sons or former wards (*barwai*) of very rich Maradi merchants, who have helped them make a start in business. They persuade young migrants from the countryside to join *Izala*, and may even offer them work. This movement also recruits among school-leavers in Maradi, who see its doctrine as a form of

<sup>13</sup>This merchant recently offered 500,000 CFA francs (the cost of a pilgrimage to Mecca) to a *marabout* from Zinder who had won a national prize for his knowledge of the Qur'an.

Islam better adapted to the modern world. Opponents maintain that young people are attracted to *Izala* with offers of money, which some allege comes from Saudi Arabia via Nigeria, and that they are then paid to spread the new doctrine. Whether this accusation is true or not, more and more people seem to be joining the movement.

Many of these *alhazai* live in the residential part of the new Zaria quarter (also called *Izalawa*). They meet during the daytime at a place called Saudia, where they can handle affairs without being disturbed by city life or beggars and where they are building a mosque. They thus seem to be setting themselves apart from the city.

This reformist movement also has a quite different conception of money. Like other merchants in Maradi, with whom they do business, the *Izala alhazai* are involved in trade, particularly with Nigeria. Belonging to different religious groups does not stand in the way of business. But whereas their elders are ostentatious and redistribute earnings widely among clients, *marabouts* and the poor, the *Izala alhazai* have a reputation of keeping their money for themselves, of being tight-fisted. This represents a significant change of mentality. In the Sudanic and Sahelian cultures of West Africa,<sup>14</sup> traditional values condemn the accumulation and enjoyment of wealth by oneself. Acquiring riches is justified only if one redistributes part of them; the only reason for being wealthy is to show off one's wealth through prestigious expenditure, so as to position oneself in the social hierarchy. The *Izala* ideology runs against this conception, since it preaches individualism and a rational utilization of wealth.

Although religious cleavages run through the Muslim community in Maradi, they do not extend to the business world. A *marabout* explained, "You can do business with anybody; what's important is to earn a profit." Another went even further: "Money has no smell, and you can, indeed, do business with non-Muslims, with Christians for example." Nonetheless, one is reluctant to extend credit outside one's own group. A *marabout* told me that a *sadalu* or *kabalu* merchant avoids lending money to an *Izala*, because the latter can use the loan as a way of pressuring the lender to join the movement. Although business transcends religious affiliation, the latter does come into play in client networks. For example, a *sadalu* or *kabalu alhaji* will hire men (dependent traders, cooks, drivers, laborers etc.) who share his religious views. Likewise, young *Izala* bosses will only hire persons who agree to join their movement, and in this way they obtain new recruits in exchange for jobs.

<sup>14</sup>J.-L. Amselle and E. Grégoire, "Etat et capitalisme en Afrique de l'Ouest," (Paris: Document de travail, l'EHESS, 1988).



### Conclusion

Islam is still a sign of distinction for Hausa traders in Niger as well as northern Nigeria.<sup>15</sup> In Maradi, Islam began growing, along with trade, during the colonial period. Nowadays, the city has become a commercial and religious center with, as a result, a burgeoning economy and population. In a study of migrations, Herry<sup>16</sup> has written:

This is a specific, essential aspect of migration toward Maradi: the importance of migrations related to Islam in this area. This can be considered to be one of the major factors in the city's growth and socio-economic development.

Trade, too, attracts migrants to come and take their chances in the city.

As it has spread, Islam has adapted remarkably well to Hausa norms and customs, and even reinterpreted some of them. In Maradi, Islam is now religiously, economically and socially predominant. Through it merchants have created a sense of identity that has taken various forms over the years, the most recent being membership in the *Izala* movement.

The *Izala* ideology tends to rationalize religious practices (by rejecting pagan customs, the attribution of supernatural powers to *marabouts*, and all practices that are "not written"), social relations (by challenging tradition and customary authorities) and conceptions of money. Although, until recently, ostentation as well as the redistribution and enjoyment of wealth were frequently practised by the *alhazai* (and still are by the oldest among them), the young *alhazai* favorable to *Izala* prohibit such practices. Abstaining from enjoyment, they prefer putting wealth to more rational uses. For this reason they have become unpopular. They are often called "young rich kids," "people who want to get ahead quick" and "pampered children," because many of them come from well-to-do families. Apparently, the *Izala* ideology is to the Islamic brotherhoods what Protestantism is to Catholicism.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>See I. Tahir, "Scholars, Sufis, Saints and Capitalism in Kano, 1904-1974," unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1975; and A.U. Dan Asabe, "Comparative Biographies of Selected Leaders of the Kano Commercial Establishment," unpubl. MA thesis, Bayero University (Kano), 1987.

<sup>16</sup>C. Herry, "Croissance urbaine et santé à Maradi (Niger). Caractéristiques démographiques, phénomènes migratoires," (GRID, University of Bordeaux II, 1990).

<sup>17</sup>M. Weber, *L'éthique protestante et l'esprit du capitalisme* (Paris, 1967).

*Izala* provides a framework for the increasing individualism which is appearing in response to the need to adjust to new cultural, social, economic and political contexts. The *Izala* doctrine, which so advantageously combines religion and business, may constitute a new form of Islam that is better adapted to meeting the modern world's economic and social requirements. Personal senses of identity do change over time, as we have seen. But, despite current efforts, the *Izala* movement will probably have trouble spreading into rural areas, where tradition is still strong.

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