

***TransIslam* Research Project**

IFRA-Nigeria

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Introduction

At the crossroads of major trans-Saharan caravan routes, the area that now encompasses northern Nigeria and southern Niger has been, from a historical perspective, an area of unrestricted movement of people, goods, and knowledge. In this area, which has been particularly dynamic since the late 18th century, powerful Hausa commercial cities such as Kano, Katsina, Zaria, or Zinder, have had a cultural and economic influence, while the hegemony of the Sokoto Caliphate has allowed for a broad dissemination of specific religious practices and knowledge. Today, northern Nigeria (the states of Kaduna, Kano, Sokoto, Borno, Katsina, Kebbi, Yobe and Jigawa) as well as southern Niger (the regions of Diffa, Zinder, Maradi, Tahoua and Dosso) still constitute a homogeneous zone whose strong cohesion is based particularly on cultural and linguistic unity (Hausa being the common language), permanent and largely informal commercial exchanges, as well as more intense human circulation. Islam is also an essential unifying element whose forms, discourse, practices, and modes of dissemination have changed. The channels through which religious ideologies are currently transmitted between northern Nigeria and southern Niger overlap with other economic and social dynamics. This region, rooted in the tradition of commerce, is a zone of passage, transit, and of numerous trades; it is a migratory, commercial, and financial crossroads. All these exchanges facilitate the transmission and dissemination of currents of thought related to Islam, especially those coming from northern Nigeria, which have a constant influence in southern Niger and beyond, in neighboring countries. The *TransIslam* project will first focus on the various ways in which these new thinking processes and practices of Islam emerge. First, this project will examine the appearance of “reformist” movements, which were influenced by foreign models and are competing with older movements. Then, it will analyze the place of early Sufi movements; deeply rooted and still constituting a large majority, they have adapted to contemporary dynamics and are constantly evolving. Finally, the project will aim to understand the nature and role of new radical movements.

Since the early 1980s, northern Nigeria has been witnessing a revival in terms of Islamic ideologies and practices. "Traditional" brotherhoods such as Tidjaniyya, previously largely dominant, experienced an implementation and dissemination of trends inspired by current developments in the rest of the Muslim world. The Iranian revolution and the rise of the Saudi Wahhabi model were the starting point of important religious reconfigurations in the northern states of Nigeria as well as in Niger. These trends, which were brought from outside, have been adapted and have taken on new forms at the local level. The *Islamic Movement*, inspired by the khomeinian doctrine, has always remained outside the spheres of political power, refusing to compromise with the Nigerian government. The *Izala* movement, however, inspired and funded by the kingdoms and emirates of the Arabian Peninsula, has agreed to become part of the secular state in Nigeria as well as in Niger and, by doing so, has found its way into political spheres quite effectively. The coexistence of almost "institutionalized" movements and revolutionary groups within the same religious space attests to the presence of different logics of adaptation and appropriation, which could be interesting to analyze. This would shed some light on the place that these movements occupy in the religious landscape of this region as well as their positions vis-à-vis emerging radical groups.

In recent years, religious activities in northern Nigeria have taken even more complex and varied forms. Proselytism is blatant evidence of this, with directly perceptible effects, especially since they occur both in Nigeria and in Niger. Indeed, Nigerian preachers have found in the Nigerien population an ever growing audience. Cities in the south of Niger such as Maradi and Zinder, located far away from the capital, are developing a model of autonomy from Niamey, which leads to the construction of an increasingly differentiated religious identity.

The consistency of the Niger-Nigeria zone is, in this process, a key element. In addition to Nigerian preachers, marabouts, and Malams going back and forth between the two countries, we find new dissemination strategies which were developed thanks to new technologies: preaching cassettes, DVD, VCD and websites in Hausa. Nigeria now produces an exponential amount of media in various shapes and forms that allows for a wide dissemination of religious discourse.

New questions are raised by the emergence of violent sectarian movements such as *Boko Haram*, the spread of a radical ideology associated with armed combat, as well as the mode of repression adopted by the Nigerian government to face these phenomena. Is the emergence of these new forms of radical Islam an isolated phenomenon, or is it an indicator of a broader evolution of

Nigerian and Nigerien societies? In a context where religious culture can be influenced by global geopolitics and where some media transcription deforms the analytical lens, it is essential to redefine the basics, in conjunction with the specific historical and religious identity of the Niger-Nigeria zone. It is essential to place the phenomena of religious evolution in the local social context, in which a secular governance prevails.

This Islamic revival is powered by a high mobility, of men and of material and cultural products. In Nigeria as in Niger, several social groups play an important role in the transmission of knowledge, practices, as well as means and resources, related to Islam. Pilgrims who go to Mecca, students who receive scholarships in the Maghreb, or traders doing business in the Gulf emirates, whether conscious of it or not, are agents of dissemination at the religious level.

The *TransIslam* project will first focus on identifying these “agents of dissemination” of religious transformations between Nigeria and Niger who, at the local level, ensure the dissemination of ideas and Islamic practices. It will then focus on identifying the locations and circuits where these interactions take place. The border is the main area where many agents of religious transformations cross path, but it is not the only place where these dynamics can be noticed. In the towns and villages of northern Nigeria and southern Niger, these evolution processes can be observed in several specific places such as mosques or schools, but also—in terms of state bodies—in local governments and through implemented policies.

The area encompassing northern Nigeria and southern Niger is a vantage point for understanding the dynamics of religious dissemination and transformation in a much wider context. Interactions between Niger and Nigeria also include neighboring countries, like Mali or Chad, as well as countries in North Africa, such as Libya and Algeria. This allows us to consider these religious dynamics not as autonomous elements following their own logic and rules, but rather as elements of a set of constantly interconnecting regional movements.

The power for action of radical groups with a jihadist approach currently poses serious security threats to various states in the region, for which the issue of potential connections between these violent groups is a major concern. Since the area of interest is directly open to the Sahara and the Sahel, we will examine the role and place in these dynamics of movements such as AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) or MOJWA (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa), as well as their links to the north Nigerian movements. Niger rests on a very fragile stability, which largely depends on the way things will develop in the near future. Since the first terrorist

attacks on its soil in June 2013, Niger has been constantly threatened by the spread of acts carried out by groups such as *Boko Haram*, Ansaru AQIM or MOJWA, which have been active in neighboring countries. The many violent acts which they carried out remind us that the role of Islamist armed groups in the regional geopolitics is neither symbolic nor isolated. These groups play an important part in reconfigurations and sub-regional socio-political dynamics.

By analyzing these new dynamics, by gaining insight on how past or on-going transformation / adaptation / appropriation processes function, the *TransIslam* project will shed light on the different dimensions of this booming religious activity: its social and political effects, as well as its impact on the security situation.

Objectives and ambitious or innovative nature of the project

The *TransIslam* project will provide a detailed analysis of changes occurring in the Niger-Nigeria religious space. This project will be led by a team of experienced European, Nigerian and Nigerien researchers, who are familiar with this particular field and context, and will have a strong institutional base, both in Niger and in Nigeria. Most of these researchers already know one another and share mutual respect. Some of them have already collaborated on research programs and have thus already been part of a hybrid team. Contacts made during previous programs have been extremely positive and productive. They are all conscious of the importance of building successful and sustainable scientific relations between academic spheres in Niger and Nigeria. The *TransIslam* project uses a cross-border angle that has so far been little developed in studies on Islam in Niger or in Nigeria. This project will therefore seek to bring together Anglophone and Francophone fields of research, which have long remained impermeable to each other. The old ties between southern Niger and northern Nigeria as well as their strong cultural and linguistic cohesion are assets which can be used in this field of research. English and French have been used in previous collaborative research, but Hausa is also a convenient working language which all researchers speak fluently. This makes it easier for members of the team to communicate, but it also allows them to analyze the numerous documents that are written or recorded in Hausa: newspapers, books, tapes, DVDs, etc. Some of the researchers involved in this project are also Arabists. Their fluency in written Arabic—and thus, Koranic Arabic—also allows them to integrate documents produced in Arabic to our corpus.

With the *TransIslam* project, previously established connections between Nigerian and Nigerien researchers will therefore be strengthened, the collective work will be extended and upgraded, allowing for the emergence of a functional Niger-Nigeria scientific network.

In addition to the human, cultural, linguistic, and academic ties that exist between its members, the team that will be in charge of the *TransIslam* project will have undeniable advantages for the analysis of religious transformations in southern Niger and northern Nigeria. First, researchers are physically located in the areas studied, which makes it easier for them to consider fieldwork there, including areas that are difficult to access, such as Borno State or the Diffa region, where European researchers cannot go. Also, the members of the research team are from the universities of Niamey or Zaria and maintain very good relations with their colleagues from the universities of Kano, Maiduguri or Zinder. The team will be supported by these local contacts who will be able to help with information gathering, literature search, or conducting interviews.

All these advantages ensure the collection of original field data and of new sources. In addition to this, the researchers' knowledge of the social, political, and religious context of the region, combined with their scientific rigor, ensures a particularly fine and thorough analysis of these data.

The project will be coordinated from Ibadan, in Nigeria. Due to the prevailing security situation in northern Nigeria, meetings and seminars planned for this project will be held in Niamey, Niger.

Comparing visions, constantly shifting the analytical lens, seems essential to achieve a complete and scientifically admissible study of cross-border religious movements. This is what makes the *TransIslam* project innovative. Thanks to a team both well-established in the field and well-dispersed throughout the area studied, this project is able to cover a wide field of research both efficiently and productively. For this research project to be geographically located within the studied area is indeed essential. Anchoring this project, both on an institutional and human level, in northern Nigeria and southern Niger, is an important step in the overall development of research on Sub-Saharan Islam.

Scientific program, methodology and project structuring

The *TransIslam* project covers a 25-month period and two countries: Niger and Nigeria.

Coordination of the research team will be handled by the institution that created this project.

It is divided into 3 main phases:

- Literature review, identification of issues and fields to be studied.
- Fieldwork
- Pooling of results and scientific production

The project will draw on methods used in the social sciences and humanities. The methodology applied to research in anthropology, sociology, history, political science and in Peace & Conflict Studies, transposed to religious dynamics, will constitute a set of theoretical and operating practices for this work. Researchers will bring their own experience and expertise for the benefit of the entire team. Several fieldwork models can be tested, used, and compared, especially in the different contexts of Niger and Nigeria.

Extensive knowledge of the existing literature is a prerequisite to define lines of inquiry and research hypotheses. The next step will be to identify all local, institutional, and informal actors involved in the processes studied. Fieldwork locations and research methods will be chosen according to the topics. Field surveys and interviews, once transcribed and processed, will constitute a body of original sources.

Also, the *TransIslam* project aims to pay particular attention to young researchers from both Niger and Nigeria by supporting research projects related to the themes developed, through the funding of fieldwork and the publication of their research results. A call for proposals will be launched in the first phase of the project; the six best proposals will be selected. Selected researchers will carry out field surveys in addition to those conducted by members of the *TransIslam* project and will present the results of their research during the final seminar. Six scholarships of € 2,500 each are included in this project. These additional and complementary works will help young researchers to develop their research skills and will make it easier for them to integrate the academic world. This will also allow the *TransIslam* project to broaden its horizons.

Work Schedule:

- The first three months will be devoted to mobilizing researchers. The first correspondences (via email and telephone) between the project coordinator and the selected researchers will encourage a first reflection on the issues to be explored as well as the fields of research to be investigated.
- A meeting will then be organized in order to set the teamwork in motion. Its aims will be to present the project and its aims, identify people who could possibly be mobilized in order to work in the field, and, finally, establish modes of communication for team members.
- For the next two months, each researcher will focus on individual work: putting together and having an extensive knowledge of a comprehensive bibliography on Islam in the region and the social dynamics, political, and religious that are specific to this area. Researchers will also try to identify recent and ongoing work on religious issues in Niger and Nigeria.
- Meanwhile, a call for proposals for young Nigerien and Nigerian researchers (at the Master and PhD levels) will be launched. Candidates will have a month and a half to submit a research proposal on the themes developed by *TransIslam*. The following month will be devoted to the selection of the six best projects; researchers will be asked to present their proposals at the methodological meeting.
- At the end of this first individual work phase, a methodological meeting will be held to define the issues, identify areas of research, and to prepare for fieldwork (the itineraries, the feasibility of investigations, choosing people to be interviewed ...)
- The next seven months will be devoted to fieldwork, conducting interviews and transcribing them. We should expect to do investigative work in the regions of Maradi, Zinder, Birni N'Konni, Kano, and Maiduguri, as well as around the border area, focusing on zones of transit, exchange, and sociability. Investigations in Zaria, Niamey, or in Jos, will probably have to be considered, in order to assess the scope of religious transformations in areas located further away from the border. Interviews will be conducted with the various "agents of dissemination:" students, traders, preachers ...
- A meeting for the pooling of data collected in the field will be organized at the end of the investigation period, where the first results of the research will be discussed and initial hypotheses will be questioned again. Comparing individual work will help broaden each member's perspectives but will also give more meaning to the whole study. If necessary, new hypotheses can be made and additional fieldwork can be considered, in pairs.

- Two months will then be devoted to the preparation of a progress report by each researcher.
- Over the next four months, further investigative work will be conducted by groups of at least two researchers, from Niger and Nigeria, who will travel together on sites they have previously defined, depending on the issues they are working on. The idea is to develop a common approach, enriched by comparative perspectives, which will allow for a double take on these issues; Nigerien and Nigerian researchers will benefit from the views, the opinions, and the advice of their colleagues.
- Additional field reports will be prepared by each group during the month following the end of the second investigation period.
- Meanwhile, the selected young researchers will do field work for a minimum period of three months (done consecutively or spread out over time) and collect new data on specific themes. They will present their findings during the restitution seminar. Each of them will write a scientific article which will then be published.
- When all the field work is completed and all reports are written, a restitution seminar will be organized, during which the different modes of exploitation of the results will be discussed.
- During the last three months of the project, each researcher will work on the exploitation of the results obtained during field work, both individually and in groups. The idea is to allow sufficient time for members of the research project to write scientific articles, but also to write articles that will allow for dissemination outside the academic field, or more technical reports for government agencies, for example. The form, content, objectives, and means of dissemination of nonscientific documents will be discussed during the second meeting. Each researcher will write at least two different types of articles.

Coordination and organization of the project

The *TransIslam* project will be coordinated by the Deputy Director of IFRA, assisted by the scientific director of the same institution. All meetings—for preparation, methodology, and pooling of results—will take place in Niamey. Niger's capital is indeed part of the studied area and is an ideal meeting point for researchers from Niger, Europe, and Nigeria.

In addition to the meetings for preparation, methodology, and the pooling of results, project coordinators will follow up on the research. The researchers, depending on their schedule and how fast they work, will meet with the project coordinators, in Niger or in Nigeria, at least twice

during the first investigation phase and at least once during the second investigation phase and the writing stage. Also, regular communication via telephone and email will allow coordinators to stay up-to-date on the progress of each researcher.

The supporting institution has a full-time financial manager. He will therefore be in charge of all financial aspects of the project, under the supervision of the principal financial manager of the Embassy of France in Abuja. Consequently, all transactions will be done in accordance with French accounting rules.

Description of work by task

Task # 1:

Project coordination

Objectives: Through the different meetings, but also through personal monitoring of the work of each researcher, coordinators make sure that things run smoothly throughout the various phases, including fieldwork done individually and in pairs. They should be able to answer questions researchers may have and help them find solutions to any problems they may encounter during the project. Coordinators must also ensure that deadlines are met for reports as well as final documents.

Program:

- Put together an effective and functional team
- Ensure that researchers are strongly involved in the project and are scientifically rigorous
- Establish a network of contacts in different universities of Niger and Nigeria
- Ensure smooth communication between all participants

Task # 2:

Administrative and financial management of the project

Objectives: The financial manager of the supporting institution, under the supervision of the principal financial manager of the Embassy of France in Abuja, will make sure that all activities run smoothly until the project is completed.

Program:

- Ensure that payments are made in a timely manner
- Manage the financial aspects of the organization of meetings

- Comply with accounting standards and provide the documents that are required for the preparation of a financial report

Task # 3:

Organization of meetings and seminars in Niamey

Objectives: The main project coordinator will be responsible for the logistical and scientific organization of various meetings planned in Niamey.

Program:

- Make sure researchers are well taken care of and are given proper working conditions during their stay in Niamey
- Enhance the workspace and resources available locally
- Ensure team cohesion through these meetings

Task # 4:

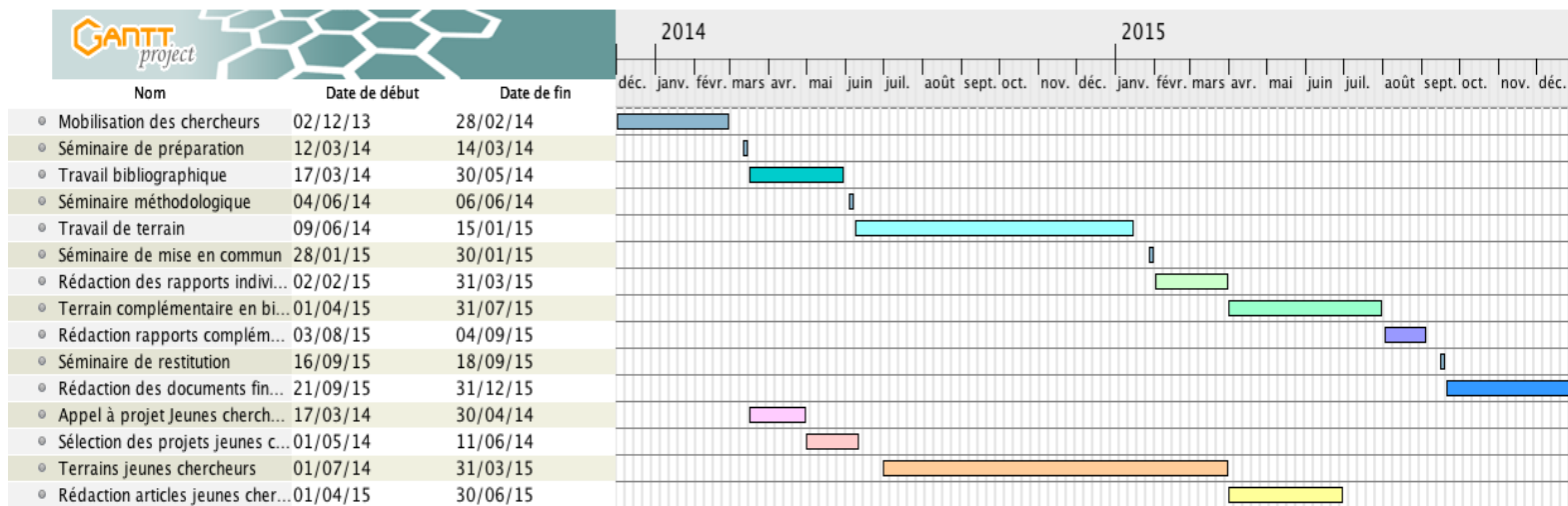
Writing final reports and documents

Objectives: The coordinators will ensure the delivery of individual reports as well as complementary reports in accordance with the schedule. They will also make decisions, in accordance with researchers, on the form that the documents written at the end of the research project will take and make sure that they meet the deadlines.

Program:

- Follow up on the work of researchers during the writing phases
- Provide researchers with methodological and bibliographical tools

Calendar:



Strategies for the exploitation and visibility of results

The results of the research conducted under the *TransIslam* project will be exploited and made visible through the production of scientific articles and documents intended for dissemination outside the academic field.

The dissemination of scientific articles will be facilitated by the publication policy developed by the institution supporting this project: a partnership has been established with the University of Leiden, in the Netherlands, to publish works based on the production of this network of researchers about the work they carried out. In addition to this, the supporting institution negotiated the creation of a collection on revue.org; publishing online will allow for a broad access to such works.

Also, the dissemination of this research project will be done in partnership with the *cellule d'expertise prospective et d'analyse* - CEPA (prospective expertise and analysis cell) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Niger, through publications and presentations during seminars organized by CEPA.

The idea is to produce several types of documents (scientific papers, technical reports, advocacy documents ...) and explore different modes of dissemination. Political decision-makers are interested in issues of religious movements and their socio-political impact. Therefore, the results of the *TransIslam* project will, as much as possible, be made visible to government bodies concerned by this topic (particularly in France, Niger, and Nigeria).