

# Gendered Media and Gendered Religion: Female Preachers, Audiovisual Media and the Construction of Religious Authority in Niamey

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In many African countries, the democratization process that began in the 1990s has created the conditions for alternative media outlets, generally referred to in Francophone Africa as 'médias privés'. Niger was no exception. By the mid-1990s, the deregulation of the media was already effective and had led to a proliferation of audiovisual outlets, mostly TV and radio stations in particular in urban context. Niamey, the capital became a field of waves as interest in audiovisual media increased as never before, among promoters, their audience and most of all media practitioners. Not surprisingly, this context of proliferation gave various public actors the opportunity to devise strategies designed to appropriate these platforms for various agendas. Among these are male Muslim leaders who found in the new radio and TV stations the platform to advance a religious reform agenda. However, at the beginning of this process, even though women were central to this agenda, they were generally absent from these platforms, mostly because, as many Muslim male preachers have argued, they should remain within the domestic arena. As Eisenlohr (2006) has shown, media can be 'systems of discursive dissemination with their own modes of exclusion and inclusion, sometimes establishing new spheres of discursive exchange and public debate in the Muslim world'. Such a point can validly apply to the Nigerien context where the democratization process and the proliferation of media outlets have introduced shifting dynamics with the public sphere, but more specifically within the Islamic sphere.

However, in Niger, one of the striking developments in recent years has been the emergence of female voices in particular on TV and radio stations, despite the prescription that their role should remain circumscribed within the domestic arena. Challenging the conventional arrangements within media and Islamic practices, women preachers have taken the role of speaking for Islam, using spaces they have conquered and secured on various

TV and radio stations. Through various programs centering on Islam, they have now a sustained presence and visibility within both the media landscape and the public sphere.

Recent scholarly examinations of the dynamics of Islam and gender in Niger have highlighted two distinctive trends. In her book *Engaging Modernity*, Alidou describes and analyzes the spaces women Islamic leaders have created to promote a culture of learning, particularly in urban context. She shows how Muslim women who, a few years ago, were at the margin of public life have risen to become leaders of significant learning communities. I follow this same problematic in a recent publication (Sounaye 2011) showing how, building on a new knowledge economy, women in Niamey have not only contributed to learning the Qur'an, but have also broken taboos that have kept them under a status of mere recipients of Islamic learning. Now producers of Islamic learning, they have created their own Madrasa and have developed various strategies to make their voice heard, especially in matters related to women's social status and political representations.

Building on the argument that the reformist discourse of the beginning of the 1990s has affected not only the urban context, but also the rural and the semi-urban context, Masquelier tackle the problematic of women's resistance, showing how they develop a social pragmatism that would eventually redefine the terms of the debate over the role and the status of women with the Muslim context of a town she studied (Masquelier 2009).

As interesting and insightful as these studies may have been, they seem to overlook the central role of the media within the dynamic of the public sphere and particularly the role

women using the media have played in reconfiguring not only Islamic practices, but also the media landscape. Central to my argument is that with the democratization of Islam, the deregulation of the media and the gradual effect of women's entrepreneurship, gendered configurations of the media and religion have occurred, making these spheres, especially in urban context, a privileged locus to examine the historical transformations that resulted from the 1990s reform processes.

This article is located at the intersection of media, religious and gender studies. Based on a series of fieldwork I have undertaken from 2008 in Niamey, the capital city of Niger, I describe and analyze women's intervention in the Islamic sphere as they appropriate radio and TV platforms to construct their religious authority and suggest new interpretations related to women's rights and gender spaces.

## A Quick View: Religion, Media and Democratization

Religion is known for playing a dual role that may be seen as contradictory. It may be a vehicle for both social change and social control. While providing many communities around the world a discourse of liberation or resistance against hegemonic and dominant powers, institutions and discourses, religion has also appeared as a conservative force, used to maintain gender inequality, in particular in the way it distributes social roles. For example, in many religions only men are prophets. In addition, women are excluded from various positions related to instruction and preaching. Within a modernist framework, perhaps, no other source of norms and values has received more criticism for its conservative role.

Generally perceived as a discourse of an established order, religion in the Nigerien society has played a major role in the configuration of gender roles. This became particularly visible and of public interest with the rise of the Islamic organizations in the early 1990s, as a political liberalization

process was getting rid of the one-party rule that has characterized governance in the country since independence in 1960. As political parties multiplied, so did the Islamic organizations, breaking the monolithic religious sphere dominated until then by the state-sponsored *Association Islamique du Niger* created shortly after Kountche's military took over in 1974. For more than fifteen years, the *Association Islamique du Niger* was the only organization authorized to speak for Islam in the country. At the beginning of the 1990s, a trend of democratization within the political arena and within the Islamic sphere began, with many underprivileged, marginalized, disenfranchised actors formally gaining prominence and assuming public roles. Political pluralism became a reality while the Islamic sphere restructured, giving way to numerous Islamic organizations. Recent statistics from the Ministry of Interior, for example, show more than 45 legally registered Islamic organizations.

One of the most affected by the 1990s' wave of democratization, the mediascape will also restructure with various private initiatives, which eventually led to the end of the monopoly of the state media. Until 1993, there were only 2 main mass-media outlets – La Voix du Sahel and Tele Sahel – both controlled by the state and therefore reflecting only the opinion of the government. However, media deregulation in 1994 propelled this number to more than a hundred established media outlets with regular and daily broadcast. In comparison, a recent study on medias and religions in West Africa (Bathily and Institut Panos Afrique de l'Ouest 2009), for example, listed for Niger 148 medias outlets (143 radios and 5 televisions). Media houses such as *Bonferey*, *Dounia*, *Tenere* have become major players in the mediascape, in particular because they combine radio and television and have branches across the country offering valid alternatives to the state-sponsored outlets.

Obviously media deregulation played a significant role in the democratization process. It has also helped to restructure the Islamic sphere, providing a platform for truth claims for competing Islamic trends. Thus, the discourse of democratization, in particular in its freedom of association and freedom of religion dimension, favored an increased religious activism resulting in the creation of numerous organizations (Niandou and Alzouma 1996). The reformist movement, known as Izala, emerged within this con-

text, now that the public sphere has opened up to multiple and often competing perceptions of Islam, governance, social institutions and gender roles (Masquelier 2009; Soares, Otayek et al. 2009). The genealogy of the Izala, a trend that promotes Islamic practices strictly in line with the Qur'an and the Sunna (the tradition of the prophet Muhammad), show how this movement was able to devise strategies and capitalize on the alternative media by developing systematic preaching campaigns on the newly established non-state media. This move allowed the Izala trend to fight back against critics who have portrayed it as a troublemaker, and even establish itself as an alternative to the Sufi organizations. The new media outlets, especially the network of urban FM radios helped this Islamic trend to reach a large number of urban dwellers, the primary target of its reform discourse.

Analysts have consistently highlighted the structural changes democratization brought to Africa. At a closer look, we realize that the significance of these changes is intricately related to the cultures and subcultures that emerged within this context. Larkin suggests that we look at media as an infrastructural basis that shapes socio-cultural life (Larkin 2008). The media world in that sense is primarily a cultural world where norms and values are exposed.

From this perspective and to close this background section, I will observe that media became important in Niger's democratization process in part because the overarching preoccupation revolved around the Nigerien moral order. What social order and what normative framework should shape the democratization process became two key questions that have driven activism in the broader public sphere, but also within more limited spheres. Gender became central to the attempts by political actors, religious figures, feminists and human rights' activists to answer these questions (Sounaye 2005; Alio 2009) while polarization became the distinctive feature of the views expressed: on one hand are Secularist activists who articulate a human rightist agenda and hope to promote women's rights and gender equality; on the other hand are Islamic organizations which, in their rejection of what they viewed as a ramping secularization of France-inspired *laïcité*, demanded the implementation of political norms in conformity to Islam.

The religious views challenged the normative framework of the democratization

process and attack its symbolic sites such as the constitution, the educational system and its promotion of women's status. In their criticism of the democratization norms, Muslim activists have generally pointed to the foreignness of these norms and their unfitness to Niger's society. More specifically, these views translated into Muslim activists' hostility to the family law reform (*Code de la Famille*) (Alio 2009; Zakari 2009), their opposition family planning initiatives and the Convention for the Elimination of Discriminations Against Women (Sounaye 2005; Kang 2009) and more recently in 2007-2008, their rejection of the Maputo Protocol aimed at gender equality. In many ways, women's status has kept the public sphere in Niger busy, making gender 'one of these symbolic confrontations', to use Cruise O'Brien's (2003) terminology.

### Gendering the Islamic Presence in the Media

The 1990s democratization process has produced in many African contexts, and particularly in Niger, one of the historical transformations that redefined not only the political arena, but also many sectors of public life. The impact of the democratization on the Islamic sphere has been structural, breaking the monolithic nature of the Islamic sphere and providing many individual and collective entrepreneurs the opportunity to emerge as public actors. The conjunction between the deregulation of the media that followed the end of the monopoly of the state-sponsored media, and women's religious entrepreneurship, resulted in an increased presence of women on TV and radio. Using media to preach and popularize the message of Islam has proved strategic for many women who are seeking to change the gendered conditions of their lives. As Root et al. (2009) notes, 'sociologists use the term *agency* to describe the ways that people seek to change their social circumstances, to dismantle existing ways of thinking and acting, and to create new ideas and new social institutions'. It is precisely this agency that I intend to illustrate. To that end, I present two cases to illustrate how media have provided a platform for Muslim women activists to challenge conventional perception of their role and space and eventually lead them to popularity.

Within a religious sphere dominated by male figures, radio and TV are giving female figures the tools and the platforms

to construct religious authority as they challenge not only the propensity of media houses to privilege male figures, but also religious institutions (sermons and fatwa) which have traditionally been defined as male preserve. I quickly present two cases that illustrate this trend, before I focus on the case of Bushara, presenting her views and outlook on Islam and gender roles.

### **Mallama Huda**

More than her teaching responsibilities in a secondary school in Niamey, it was her appearance on national TV (Télé Sahel) that propelled Mallama Huda to fame and provided her with the platform to promote Islamic learning and defend the cause of women. For a long time, she was the only female speaking for Islam on the media. In that capacity, she was sometimes the guest of 'Émission islamique', a program on which she answered questions and formulated *fatwas* [legal opinions, generally the preserve of the male clerics] on social and political issues.

More recently in 2008, she was the leading figure in the opposition women's Islamic organizations expressed against the Maputo Protocol. Within the democratization era, she gained more prominence, moving from a secondary figure on national TV to a much visible one. She became the independent voice who 'dares' to challenge conventions and practices well established by the *ulama*. Her interventions concentrated on two media outlets: Télé Sahel, the state-run TV station which broadcasts across the country; and Ténéré, a private complex of radio-TV station broadcasting only in the main urban areas of the country. Her tone and arabized-Hausa accent made her a recognizable voice on all audiovisual media in Niamey. Many refer to her affectively as *Mamma* to show her respect. In return, she refers to her followers as *diya ta*, *kangwa ta* (my daughter, my little sister), especially during 'Courrier Musulman', her program on TV Ténéré which has drawn her harsh criticisms. Often, her interventions have focused not only on women in Islam, but also on household management in conformity to the prescriptions of the Islamic scriptures. In making a case for women and children's well being, she rejects the conventional female behavior at odds with the Sunna and the Qur'an. She promotes mutual understanding within the household, but most importantly, she calls for solidarity among

women, especially the elite and the uneducated housewives.

Before 2000, very few outlets existed to allow a significant representation of Islamic sensibilities in the media. Today, as more than 30 FM radio and TV stations broadcast in Niamey alone, many Muslim scholars and entrepreneurs like Mallama Huda have managed to capitalize on the pluralism and the multiplicity of the mass media. However, Mallama Huda is 'gradually retiring' from TV programs, leaving this space for disciples who are now following in her footsteps. Thus, her interventions on the media have remained minimal, though she is still invited to make *fatwa*. With the activities of her organization (Union des Femmes Musulmanes du Niger) that keep her busy, she has little time for preaching and TV programs. Still, she hangs on her role as a Muslim scholar on the path of Aikin Adini, a Hausa concept that stresses the obligation for Muslims, in particular the learned ones, to 'help Islam expand'. This notion, which shapes Muslims' participation in social transformation, encompasses activities such as preaching, teaching, learning, a sum of activities that define contemporary Islamic culture in Niger. It becomes for Huda, her disciples and peers, a mission to spread the Sunna of the Prophet, and simultaneously offer the model of behavior expected from a Muslim woman. In her emergence and that of many others, the audiovisual media played a significant role.

### **Mallama Zahra**

The daughter of a prominent Sufi Sheikh, Zahra does not owe her making as an authoritative young Muslim figure to her family's social capita. She emerged amid a controversial debate over family planning in the late 1990s. While many *ulama* and most Islamic organizations rejected the proposal, sometimes with an anti-feminist tone, Zahra's organization was one of the few to maintain contact with state officials and international agencies such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on the issue. Criticized for her involvement in the initiative, she defended her position, claiming that Islam values dialogue and consultation, therefore, Muslims should consider any proposition they are presented, even if they have to reject it afterwards. In her view, dialogue and consultation should be given a chance in a Muslim context. She has often stressed this point in her nightly program on national TV (Télé Sahel) when

she answers questions sent in by the audience. *Tambaya da Amsoshi* (Questions-Answers) has become a platform where she expresses the recommendations of Islam, and her own views on social issues debated in the public sphere.

As is the case with Mallama Huda, the media played a significant role in helping Zahra gain public exposure and establishing her authority as a scholar and community leader. Her appearances on national TV were read as the validation of her degree of learning and her preparedness to assume leadership positions. This represented for many of her followers a key moment in the formation of their community. In addition to being the validation of her level of learning, this public exposure contributed to the broadening of her audience beyond her family, village circles and Sufi community. It is precisely at that moment that many organizations and international agencies began requesting her opinions on the 'Islamic implications' of their programs or projects. Gradually, she established a reputation of public speaking. Many organizations began to invite her to give lectures and presentations, generally on issues related to women and Islam. In these instances, various institutions and organizations sought to tap into her symbolic power, her expertise in Islam, her social capital and her access to the media (Alio 2009; Sounaye 2011). Indeed, her access to audiovisual media has made her a fierce defender of women's education and an advocate of women's rights. She has constantly described her taking the stand to preach and make *fatwas* as a contribution to fight ignorance, which, in her view, has hindered the promotion of women's rights.

In both cases that I present, audiovisual media become the platform where an introspection of the Nigerien society is articulated. Social critics, both women have found in the media the platforms that help them voice their views as Muslims and committed to the promotion of better gender relations. The media has also helped them to build their communities through programs that gradually provide them with an audience.

### **Erecting the Pulpit in the Studio: Bushara, a Media Personality**

I use the image of the pulpit in the studio as a metaphor for the increasing role many women are playing in making themselves authoritative voices in the midst of a

religious economy that has opened to women both religious and media spaces. This occurs also in a context where the proliferation of media outlets has provided a space for young female figures to take on significant public roles. Bushara is precisely one of those young female figures.

In approaching the problematic of gender from the intersection of religion and media practices, I wanted to highlight how Islamic activism has provided many women with the opportunity to re-draw gender borderlines as far as religious practices and leadership are concerned. Most striking in the last decade has been the emergence of women authoritative voices which use the TV as a platform to disseminate their discourses of conversion or ethical transformation. But they have also promoted a women-based view on Islam and its practices. As a conservative trend among the clerics has insisted that women should 'remain at home', regardless of their learning, Bushara, a young woman graduate of the Islamic University of Niger, has challenged this viewpoint, rejecting the domestic circumscription of female Islamic leadership, and also hosting a talk show on Bonferey, an audiovisual complex in Niamey. 'No one has exclusive rights on Islam, so let's not drive Muslims astray!' she observes.

I have interviewed many women involved in similar construction of their contribution to Islam, using media outlets. In the 1990s, there were only two women (Malama Huda and Malama Zainab) who would sporadically take the stand on TV to discuss matters related to women and household. In the last five years, however, numerous young women, generally trained at the Islamic University of the country have led the trend of public address, taking the role of preachers contributing to what they view as *da'wa* (call to Islam), not only for women, but for all Muslims in general. Bushara, for example, sees her involvement in the *da'wa* as a 'work', a religious labor that would help Muslims better understand their religion.

In Niamey, her access to the waves of the audiovisual complex Bonferey, a media created by a wealthy trader, has propelled her to the public stage and has provided her with such a visibility that she is constantly invited to participate in fora, gatherings and seminars mainly devoted to Islam. I first heard about her when, attending an Islamic seminar in the summer

2008, I asked some colleagues whether I could interview some young Muslim leaders involved in sermon activity. A woman who overheard my request immediately suggested: 'Bushara is the person you should talk to'. I have never heard about her, but quickly realized that she was a prominent voice on the media. As I would discover later, Bushara, now in her early 30s, is a media personality who has made a name for herself in hosting a religious program on one of the FM stations in Niamey. She has actually inherited the program from Hawa, another prominent female figure who spent several years advocating women's religious rights. Engaged in the popularization of Islam, and focusing on the role of women in Islam, Hawa has constantly argued that women are abused and their rights are not recognized. She is nowhere the secular feminist who allies with the liberal human rights discourse. But, taking inspiration in such women-oriented discourse, she construes women's rights systematically as the most sacred domain on Islam. Hawa has since retired and handed over the program to Bushara.

Mentored by Hawa, Bushara has gradually become a major voice among women preachers. Her program centers on the biography of Prophet Muhammad (*seerat*), but with a particular emphasis on female figures that played key roles in his life. Every Saturday afternoon, she receives calls from women seeking answers to their numerous questions related to Aisha, Khadija, Fatima, etc. all women whose lives were intricately linked to that of the Prophet. Bushara receives also calls from men, as she states: 'people don't know much about Islam's female figures...and don't be mistaken: my audience is replete with male listeners'.

She is aware of the challenge she represents in an Islamic sphere where controlling women's voice and public presence has become a major issue. Obviously, the issue is further aggravated because of the religious institution women similar to Bushara are appropriating. In effect, until recently, sermon has always been the preserve of the male cleric. Thus, a woman taking such role challenges the traditional practice of this institution. During an interview she offered me, she brought up the issue and argued:

I think the prohibition [of women from preaching on the media] can be interpreted as jealousy. It sounds like that.

This has been a recurrent issue. Last week, a friend of mine faced the same issue...it keeps coming...a few years ago there was a *Mukabala* (conference to resolve the issue), we thought it was over...and now people are bringing it up again. Those who oppose women's preaching have no arguments...they can't provide any sound justification of this prohibition...we had a conference at Palais des Congres in Niamey. I was among the presenters...we were only two female participants. The day of the presentation of my colleague, the participants [male clerics] didn't want her to speak. They refused to give her the floor for her presentation, arguing that as a woman, she should not be given the floor to speak in public. The next day, I got to address the participants and did my presentation. Afterwards, a man stood up and made some remarks. Actually, he gave no justification why women should not preach.

Pursuing her argument that the prohibition is groundless, she added:

It is right a woman stays home; but whenever necessary, she can go out. The only thing is that she cannot go out and forget about her household responsibility. Women are allowed to go out, there is no question about that. There are clauses under which she can do it, she just need to respect them.

Following the episode at Palais des Congres, more voices articulated their objection to the presence of women preachers on audiovisual media. The controversy escalated to the point that:

A few weeks ago, a cleric took the stand on TV and insulted all women preaching on TV. We are just asking that they show us the scriptures that forbid women from public preaching. We are just asking them to show us that God has made it unlawful...let's see the hadith if it does exist...Of course, we have some people who translate the verses of the Qur'an as they like and who could fabricate whatever suits them...no, we are just asking to be shown the scriptural proof (*Hujja*)...we are asking to be convinced. On our side, we know many women have contributed to the development of Islam.

Bushara's views are not unusual in the Islamic sphere where, since 2003, a second wave of restructuring has begun. In effect, women's Islamic organizations have emerged, aiming at correcting Mus-

lims' views and practices, which, against the prescription of the Qur'an and the Sunna, have been detrimental to women's rights and gender equity. In Niamey, there are now 6 TV stations and 23 FM radio stations, on which women regularly preach, translate and comment on the Qur'an and the Hadiths. In recent years, they have also designed debates during which they engage social and policy issues.

### Closing Remarks: Democratization, Discourse of Dissemination, Media Proliferation and Gendered Islam

In its initial steps, the main issue for the democratization process in Niger revolved around the type of governance to be implemented. The challenge in this process was less the institution of political or religious pluralism, but the content of the contested notion of women's status. Sociologically, however, the challenge translated into what kind of gender relations the process should inform. Political and religious reform projects throughout history have often revolved around this problematic, making women's status a domain of key symbolic confrontations. Certainly, the case in Niger is a confirmation of the permanence of this problematic with the difference that while the issue opposed those who might be called the Defenders of Islam and the Radical Secularists, at least early in the democratization process, now, it seems that the same challenge has emerged within the Islamic sphere where, female actors, voices and entrepreneurs have taken the role of gendering media spaces and religious institutions.

The creative use of media and Islam has provided women with a public space, a voice and a stage where their discourses and social entrepreneurship can affect gender relations and therefore alter social configurations and images. In a way,

this is actually happening with more than 30 women Islamic activists now appearing on the audiovisual media in Niamey alone, as I have found in a recent personal count. The early 1990s democratization and development of Islamic organizations has made women's status one of its central preoccupations. Within the Islamic sphere and because of the configuration of the organizations speaking for Muslim women, women hardly had the chance to take the stage and articulate clearly their positions. A shift has occurred since the end of 1990s with the gradual restructuring of the religious sphere and the emergence of exclusively women Islamic organizations. One can easily conclude that the case in Niger is one in which a political reform, a religious reform and a social reform combine to trigger a female representation that was unthinkable a decade ago. Democratization has provided the context, media proliferation the stage, and female entrepreneurship the agency.

Finally, I will remark that though seeking to popularize the Sunna, a move that could be associated with a conservatism characteristic of religious reform in the Muslim world, especially with the *izala* movement in Niger and Nigeria (Charlick 2004; Sounaye 2005; Masquelier 2009; Zakari 2009), the women I have focused on in reality promote a social reform that would support women's right, at least in some specific sectors of public life. They also seek gender equity when it comes to Islamic learning and accessing the pulpit, hence the rise of the social category of the Mallama, the female Muslim leader. In that regard, and in order to draw a complete picture of this problematic – located as I noted at the intersection of media, religious and gender studies – how the activism of the Malama affects Muslim media cultures is a question worth investigating.

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