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Rivalries of proximity beyond the household in Niger: political elites and the *baab-izey* pattern

Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan

Introduction: disappointment with democracy[1]

Niger, a former French colony and one of the poorest countries in the world, became independent in 1960. Following over thirty years of rule by despotic regimes (single-party rule followed by military dictatorship), a democratic period was heralded by the National Conference in 1991 – following months of protest and riots, to which the union of students was a major contributor. Competitive elections, a multiparty system, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, a democratic constitution – all of these new ingredients generated a great deal of hope from the outset. Since then, however, the dominant mood by far in all sectors of society has been one of disappointment: disappointment at the incessant games played by politicians, at the alliances that emerge from one day to the next and involve 180-degree turnarounds in policy positions, at the personal rivalries and power struggles, and at the battles between clans and different factions. The political leaders who emerged during the National Conference are still fighting for power today. All of them have alternated between power and opposition since then, and all possible permutations of alliances and conflicts have been tested over the last twenty-five years. This political class (some thousands of people, who all know each other, have been educated in the same schools and belong to the 'big families' of Niger[2]) has aged together. This entire process takes place in a context characterized by the poor delivery of public services, racketeering and the spectacular enrichment of the elites, vast youth unemployment, and widespread corruption.[3] Accordingly, it is possible to observe the increasing rejection of *politik* (the term has been adopted in the Songhay-Zarma language with highly pejorative connotations): that is, party politics, politics as practised by politicians, the politics of democracy. One indication of this trend is a creeping nostalgia for the military regime of Seyni Kountché (idealized retrospectively and credited with moral and civic rigour and a public service ethos that contrasts starkly with current political mores). Other, rather more dramatic consequences of this rejection of democratic policy and politics that can be observed in Niger,

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[1]I thank Eric Hahounou and Abdoulaye Sounaye for their comments.

[2]For a description of the role played by colonial schools in the production or reproduction of these narrow elites, see Tidjani Alou (1992).

[3]For descriptions of the daily functioning of administrations and public services in Niger, see Tidjani Alou (2001; 2002), Souley (2003), Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006) and Olivier de Sardan (2009b; 2014).

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where Muslims represent 95 per cent of the population, are the general spread of Wahhabist or Salafist ideologies, which are broadly hostile to Western democracy and to current political elites, and the presence of some local support for extreme Islamist views (cf. Boko Haram in east Niger and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa – MUJAO – in the north-west). Through their trenchant criticism of the current system and their proposal of a revolutionary alternative based on jihad or the caliphate, radical Islamist groups are benefiting from the crisis in democracy in a similar way to extreme right groups in Europe.

My intention here is to examine how this rejection of 'politics' is expressed in everyday language and the nature of the local semantic configurations on which it is based. There is a direct link (albeit not a causal one) between the social perceptions of intra-familial rivalries and the social perceptions of political rivalries. Irrespective of whether they unfold in the realm of kinship or political power, the same semiological ensemble is used in the consideration of all types of rivalries of proximity. Moreover, apart from these analogous representational logics, certain similar symbolic and pragmatic logics also criss-cross these two worlds and are associated with the intensive use of magico-religious entrepreneurs, who profit from these rivalries and, moreover, perpetuate them.

From popular Songhay-Zarma semiology to domestic practices

Two terms in the Songhay-Zarma language (the second language of Niger after Hausa), which are close in terms of their semantic content, are currently used to convey this negative perception of politics (*politik*) more precisely: *fitina*, which means discord (a term with Arabic roots), and *baab-izey-tarey*, which means jealousy and competition, and originally refers to the situation of the children of one father and different mothers.[4]

Fitina connotes all of the rivalries of proximity, starting from an Islamic semantic universe. The word originally applied to the divisions between Muslims: in other words, the (diabolical) fact of introducing discord into the community of the faithful (*umma*). In current usage it has been extended to include the political community (which, in Niger, consists of Muslims in the main) and its characteristic conflicts.

However, it is the second of these expressions, which originates from the semantic world of kinship and arises repeatedly in everyday usage, that is of interest to me here, and which I will explain in detail.

The *baab-izey* (*baaba*, father; *izey*, children – in other words, literally the sons or daughters of the father) clash with the *nya-izey* (*nya*, mother – in other words, literally the sons or daughters of the mother) in an essentially polygamous context. The *nya-izey* are the children of the same mother (generally but not always from the same father), who unite with her, while the *baab-izey* are the children of one father but different mothers. Hence an archetypical polygamous family is

[4]For an in-depth survey of Songhay-Zarma concepts and conceptions relating specifically to power and the family and, more generally, concerning history, culture and society, cf. Olivier de Sardan (1982). For a historical analysis of the transformation of precolonial social relations in Western Niger under colonization, cf. Olivier de Sardan (1984).

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composed of several maternal households under the authority of the father: the brothers and sisters within one of these households ('*même père-même mère*' – i.e. 'same father same mother' – as they are known in the colloquial French of Niger) are *nya-izey* to each other, while the half-brothers and half-sisters of different maternal households but with the same father are *baab-izey* to each other.

While the archetypical relationship between the *nya-izey* themselves is one of complicity and mutual support, the archetypical relationship among the *baab-izey* is characterized by competition and jealousy.[5]

This *baab-izey*/*nya-izey* opposition rests on three social pillars that are rooted in the realities of everyday life. The first is the latent rivalry that pits the co-wives against each other in relation to obtaining favours and presents from the husband, and prompts each individual wife to assert herself at the expense of the others. This could even be referred to as a 'co-wife syndrome' and causes one woman to view all other women as competitors or threats, and even extends beyond strictly polygamous contexts (in monogamous marriages, the husband is almost always suspected of wanting to take another wife; a husband who has divorced and remarried is suspected of maintaining an ambiguous relationship with his former wife, and the children of the first marriage are quickly perceived to be a threat to the new wife).[6]

The second pillar concerns inheritance and legacies and the preferences that a father may show through his gifts, choices and bequests to one or other of his children. These preferences are perceived as unacceptable by the children of a different mother to that of the chosen child or children.

The third pillar is specific to a very particular milieu, that of the chieftaincy. However, given that chieftaincy matters are at the very heart of rural public arenas, this feeds into all of society. In effect, since colonization (and the establishment of the administrative chieftaincy), the cantonal chiefs have been selected (by the powers that be) or elected (by the village chiefs) from the 'reigning' family: in other words, from the *ayant-droits* (the 'rights holders', who are descendants of the first cantonal chiefs), who are all brothers or cousins.[7] This selection process – or, for some decades now, election process – sometimes triggers a fierce battle between the *baab-izey* of the chief's family who compete openly or in secret for the lifelong position. As a result, the defeated half-brothers or cousins often become lifelong opponents of the appointed cantonal chief and his relatives.[8]

As we can see, polygamy is at the core of these different processes. It sustains an amalgam of jealousies and conflicts that play out in the domestic space (rivalries between co-wives, which are transmitted to their children), and sometimes also in

[5]The same opposition is found in Hausa (*dan-uwa*/*dan-uba*) and in some neighbouring languages (for example, *fa-de*/*ba-de* in Bambara in Mali), but not in others (for example in Fulfulde).

[6]These statements are based on thirty years of observation within Nigerien society (the author lives and works in Niger). For similar observations in nearby Sahelian societies, see the description of rivalries among co-wives by Fainzang and Journet (1988) concerning *Toucouleurs* and *Soninkés* in Senegal.

[7]See Tidjani Alou (2009). Moreover, parallel cousins are referred to as 'brothers' or 'sisters' in Songhay-Zarma: there is no linguistic differentiation between them and direct brothers and sisters in everyday language. In contrast, it makes a clear distinction between the eldest brothers (*beerey*, big brothers) and the youngest (*kayney*, little brothers).

[8]See Olivier de Sardan (2009a).

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the political space of the chieftaincy (to the extent that the latter is coextensive with the domestic space of the ruling family). However, this is a concealed reality insofar as public behaviour should be characterized by unity and cooperation.

From stereotypes of the African family to practical familial norms

These representations and practices are clearly at odds with a number of received ideas and clichés about 'the African family' as primarily a locus of support and solidarity. These clichés are often the result of a more or less 'primitivistic' and 'communitarianist' ideology of Western origin.[9] However, they also correspond in part to the values proclaimed by the local familial and social morality. In effect, according to the social norms that officially regulate the polygamous family, all co-wives are equal and each of them treats the children of the other wives like their own. Any mother is supposed to adopt a non-discriminatory attitude towards her own children and the children of her co-wives. In turn, the latter are supposed to consider their mother-in-law as a mother of equal status to their biological mother. These two social norms regularly feature in public discourse and in comments made to foreigners. They are often accompanied by a variety of anecdotes intended to confirm the fact that these social norms are fully internalized and applied (for example, 'Up to the age of ten, I did not know who my real mother was'). Moreover, these social norms sometimes assume a religious tenor through references to passages from the Qur'an that advocate equality within the polygamous family.

But who believes that social norms are always applied and that their observance is a common, normal and banal fact of life? Like religious norms or the norms relating to neighbourly behaviour, in practice, familial norms – which are, of course, proclaimed on the basis of affirmed moral and 'cultural' values and the object of public education – are frequently bypassed in favour of abuses, subterfuge and informal arrangements. Moreover, these divergences from the social norms are not anarchic but are regulated de facto on the quiet. In other words, behind an explicit social norm, in most cases we find implicit 'practical norms', which tacitly and covertly organize or routinize common behaviours that deviate from the proclaimed social norm (non-compliant behaviours).

I would like to quote here a pioneering analysis of a practical norm that regulates divergences from a widely shared social norm among a population in northern Burkina Faso, and which is also found in Niger. Danielle Kintz (1987) analysed the 'right way' to commit adultery among the rural Muslim Fulani (where adultery is – as elsewhere – socially and morally prohibited, but in reality – as elsewhere – is practised 'on the sly').

Social norms (often referred to as cultural norms) govern the private sphere and non-professional sphere (rules of propriety, family customs, religious obligations, ethical dictates, sport codes, associative or network-related practices, and so on). However, in Niger as elsewhere, people do not comply fully and permanently with these social norms – far from it. Most of the time, these non-compliant

[9]On stereotypes about Africa, see Courade (2006).

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practices are neither criminal nor foolish. They are routinized and follow de facto patterns, which I call 'practical norms'. While social norms are explicit and taught in public, practical norms are implicit, latent and not directly visible.[10]

It goes without saying that a woman will not bully or speak badly of the children of her co-wives in front of the father or visitors. The social norm reigns in public situations. The practical norm is applied 'on the quiet' and gives rise to subtle discriminations (in relation to the allocation of sweets, games, chores, reprimands, rewards, etc.). In the same way that practical norms regulate the behaviours of civil servants that diverge from official norms within the public sphere,[11] practical norms regulate behaviours diverging from social norms within the private sphere. Malinowski noticed the gap between prescribed family norms and actual conduct a long time ago.[12] For example, in the Trobriand matrilineal society, the matrilineal nephew inherits a man's dignities and offices and his own son is not even regarded as a kinsman. Nevertheless:

> Between father and son there obtains invariably friendship and personal attachment; between uncle and nephew not infrequently the ideal of perfect solidarity is marred by the rivalries and suspicions inherent in any relationship of succession … We are, then, once more, face to face with the discrepancy between the ideal of law and its realization, between the orthodox version and the practice of actual life. (Malinowski 1984 [1922]: 30–1)

Hence, 'practical norms' are nothing more than an exploratory concept for investigating this discrepancy highlighted by Malinowski.[13] Anthropologists are not the only scientists who (sometimes) reveal the existence of these discreet and silent practical norms. 'Conventional wisdom' (which is, in effect, a concept of popular sociology and philosophy) often touches on some of the practical norms, in any case the most common ones – if only, as we have already seen, through semiology. The *baab-izey*/*nya-izey* opposition is in direct contradiction to the familial/religious social norm of the polygamous family and the supposed equal treatment of the brothers (or sisters) and half-brothers (or half-sisters). We know that this conventional wisdom is expressed in particular through fables and sayings that are more likely to describe real practices than to legitimize moral norms (which is one of their merits). Hence, it will not come as any surprise to learn that a Songhay-Zarma proverb (*yaasey*) tells it as it is in relation to our topic: 'The daughter of your co-wife will never make beautiful braids for you.' Other proverbs, of which there are a considerable number, refer more generally to the omnipresence of conflicts within the family: 'The child you carry on your back can bite you'; 'Your father's cow is the one you learn to butcher.'[14]

[10]On practical norms in general, see Olivier de Sardan (2015a).

[11]See Anders (2010). Regarding practical norms in the context of public action, see de Herdt and Olivier de Sardan (2015). In this area, practical norms are 'the latent regulations of practices of civil servants when these do not follow official regulations' (Olivier de Sardan 2015a).

[12]This has been highlighted by Kuper (1996).

[13]On the perspective of an 'anthropology of gaps, discrepancies and contradictions', see Olivier de Sardan (2016).

[14]On Songhay-Zarma proverbs, see Hama (1973).

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The relationships between co-wives and their children are those most likely to involve conflict in the domestic arena. However, despite their formal regulation through (highly explicit and frequently invoked) social norms of respect, precedence or submission, other inter-familial relationships can also be informally fraught with frustration, bullying, violence and bad behaviour. This applies, for example, to the relationships between mothers- and daughters-in-law (which sometimes also involve difficult relationships of coexistence within the same residential unit), eldest/youngest relationships and husband/wife relationships.[15] They all display more or less concealed divergences from the social norms that are claimed in public.

It is obviously important not to go to the other extreme, however, and see family relationships as exclusively characterized by competition, jealousy, intrigue, backstabbing, vengeance, malicious gossip and betrayal. They also include relationships characterized by fraternity, support, protection and solidarity. Love and hate coexist on a permanent basis. These are the two aspects that must be considered, and this fundamental *ambivalence* in familial relationships must be taken into account without reducing it to one or other of its extremes. However, this approach is rarely adopted as the traffic is all one-way: in other words, the Nigerien family is broadly perceived in idealized terms as being the typical cradle of *nya-izey* while *baaba-izey* remains in the shadows.[16]

The extension to relationships of proximity

The *baab-izey*/*nya-izey* opposition is far from confined to the world of the family (or that of the chieftaincy family). It is also used metaphorically in everyday language. This is not surprising as the vocabulary of kinship is widely recycled in the context of interpersonal relationships. For example, *tantie* (auntie) and *tonton* (uncle) have become common expressions of respect towards older people, and expressions such as 'big brother', 'my sister' and 'my son' are frequently used to address both close and distant acquaintances with no family connection.[17] Moreover, the famous *parenté à plaisanterie* ('joking relationship'), which operates on the basis of the relationships between cross-cousins, is used on a daily basis, including between strangers, in reference to some broad 'ethnic' affiliations found throughout Nigerien society.[18]

[15]On the severity of intimate relationships in Mali, which are very similar to those in Niger and far removed from any romantic ideal, see, for example, Dumestre and Touré (1998).

[16]Let us be clear: this ambivalence in inter-familial relationships is as prevalent in Europe as it is in Niger (and in other African countries). However, the idealization of the family in Europe has long been debunked (even if it re-emerges regularly), and has been the target of often harsh criticism there (cf. André Gide's famous statement 'Families, I hate you' and Hervé Bazin's novel *Viper in the Fist*). On the other hand, the family networks and social and cultural contexts on the two continents are obviously different.

[17]Even the term '*papa*' (daddy), which is widely used in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (where it more or less corresponds to that of 'mister' in Europe), is spreading in Niger.

[18]For example, Songhay/Touaregs, Zarma/Mawri, etc. This reminds us, of course (albeit in a less structured way), of the Mandingo *senankuya*. For a description of joking relationships in Songhay-Zarma societies, see Olivier de Sardan (1982: 42–8). For a recent overview of writings on joking relationships in Africa, see Canut and Smith (2006).

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The joking relationship is frequently analysed as a cathartic process for defusing social tension. The quasi-ritualized use of a relaxed family-based outspokenness can appease interpersonal or traffic relationships (in Goffman's sense). The 'kinshipization' of relationships of proximity is frequently assessed as having an inherently pacifying effect. This is far from certain. We may identify here an ideology of family idealization that conveys its benefits through its semantic extension to extra-familial relationships. Although it is certainly the case that joking relationships can mitigate certain (unimportant) controversies or mask certain (slight) conflicts, it should never been forgotten that what is involved here is a social mechanism for the (temporary) suppression of tensions (when they remain benign) that does not constitute a conflict resolution mechanism in any sense.

In fact, the exporting of the *baab-izey/nya-izey* opposition to the non-familial social environment reminds us that relationships of proximity are just as ambivalent as familial relationships. Irrespective of their context, in all interpersonal relationships that do not involve kinship links (school, work, sport, trade, neighbourhood, associations), *baab-izey* denotes jealousy and rivalry and *nya-izey* denotes support and solidarity. In other words, conflicts of proximity are systematically expressed through references to conflicts between half-brothers and half-sisters. Like the family, the sociability of proximity is equally a space of confrontation as one of alliances. The social units of acquaintanceship and local institutions and organizations are not solely groups that are welded together by a common cause and oppose other similar groups (external contradictions), they are at the same time groups ridden with internecine tensions (internal contradictions).[19] As has been revealed elsewhere, '*face-to-face societies*' are also '*back-to-back societies*'.[20]

Thus, it will come as no surprise to learn that, in this context too, many Songhay-Zarma proverbs attempt to describe the reality of relationships between people who are close to each other: 'If feet are close to each other, they trip each other up'; 'If you fall out with your backside, you'll have to sit on your coccyx.'

Conflicts of proximity in the political world

We are now back where we started: in the political microcosm of Niger. While the term *baab-izey* is frequently used in reference to politicians, *nya-izey* is rarely heard in their regard. At a considerable remove from the public norm of concern for the public good that is supposed to regulate political behaviours, rivalry and jealousy are structural components of the political world.[21] It is important to note that *baab-izey* refers not only to the competition *between* political parties here (this is a normal feature of political life in all corners of the globe;

[19]Certain globalized ideologies idealize relations of proximity (just as others, or the same ones, idealize the family): cf. *small is beautiful*, the local gift in the face of the global market, neighbourhood and association activities as spaces of solidarity, etc.

[20]Cf. Bailey (1965: 5–7; quoted in Le Meur 2015: 413).

[21]For examples concerning local political conflicts framed by the *baab-izey* pattern in the Gaya area, see Bako Arifari (1999). Other cases studies in Niger are to be found in Olivier de Sardan and Tidjani Alou (2009) and Olivier de Sardan *et al.* (2015).

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however, it has no programmatic or ideological content in Niger), but also to the rivalries *within* parties, which are definitely a structural feature of Nigerien politics.[22] The biographies of militants and leaders testify to an extreme level of political 'nomadism': the number of politicians who have transited through three or four and sometimes more parties is high. The term 'transhumance' is regularly used in Niger to refer to this phenomenon.[23] When dissatisfied with the decisions of their parties, all leaders, be it at local or national level, do not hesitate to depart with their entire electoral clientele for another party, which is sometimes the declared enemy of the former, or to establish a new party. The motivations for these almost permanent splits and changes in allegiance are almost always personal in nature, linked to the quest for rewards, redistributions, privileges, bribes or postings, and only rarely involve programmatic differences or political disagreements. The failure to be placed at the top of the electoral list, to be appointed as mayor or director of a particular service, to be assigned to a lucrative post, to be posted as minister of a 'juicy' ministry, or to be granted a public tender that would compensate you for your services – these are all motives for the splits and changes in policy and party allegiances that are commonplace in current political life in Niger. Everyone can cite recent events involving such cases.

Hence, political conflicts in Niger are above all personal/factional conflicts (in which friends and supporters are implicated) and are, likewise, conflicts of proximity (within a single party or even, sometimes, within a single faction of a party). These are typically *baab-izey* conflicts. Every party friend is liable to become a political enemy from one day to the next; every comrade in arms can become a bitter rival. Every alliance is always, or almost always, reversible. Once again, a proverb is even more apposite in describing politics than ordinary life: 'Wherever you have a friend, you also have an enemy.' One can become the other at any time.

A semantic connection is not a causal explanation

It does not follow from all these semiological proximities and structural affinities between kinship, inter-acquaintanceship relationships and politics that there is any causal link between these three areas. Due to the unstable coexistence of friendship and enmity, support and animosity, alliances and rifts, the resemblance between them is merely a family one. I do not claim in any sense that the use of a kinship vocabulary means that kinship is a causal matrix for social relations in other spheres. It is merely a semantic matrix that provides 'conventional

[22]Of course, power struggles between rival factions and leadership battles within parties happen everywhere (there are numerous examples in the United Kingdom and the United States). In this area as in others, there is no difference *in nature* between what happens in Niger (and is quite likely to arise in the majority of African countries) and what happens in Europe (or the Americas). However, proportions and style vary significantly, depending on the particular historical contexts. For example, 'political nomadism' is rather more prevalent in Niger than in France, while the ideological battles that are commonplace in France are very rare in Niger.

[23]See Gazibo (2005) and Olivier de Sardan (2015b). This phenomenon has also been described extensively in many other African countries: see, for instance, Gazibo (2003), Lindberg (2003) and Bierschenk (2006).

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metaphors' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), which are useful for connoting the importance of personal rivalries within the political elite under a mask of collaborative relations devoted to the public interest. On this point I disagree with authors such as Schatzberg (2001), who seeks the origin of political patterns and modern governance in family patterns in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As Keesing (1985) told us long ago, we should always remember that 'conventional metaphors' in local languages should not become 'anthropological metaphysics'. The use of a kinship vocabulary in the field of political relations only means that some common features are at work in both spheres – no more, no less. There is no explanatory link.

For example, in the kinship sphere, it may be presumed that rivalries in polygamous families have their roots in the precolonial past. Conflicts surrounding chieftaincy successions, for example, were already common in the nineteenth century.[24] Of course, family structures have evolved. For instance, rivalries between co-wives may have increased within the urban middle classes. Whereas high- and mid-level civil servants are monogamous in many Muslim countries – and this was also the case in Niger in the 1980s and 1990s – nowadays almost all the members of the administrative and political elite in Niger have at least two wives (this may be a consequence of the Wahhabist wave sweeping through West Africa). Nevertheless, polygamy-induced conflicts are embedded in long-term dynamics.

The dynamics of political life in Niger are completely different to those governing the kinship sphere. Three contributory factors may be identified here.[25] The first is the colonial legacy (the modern state and bureaucracy were introduced to the country by the colonizers); current governance is a product of the colonial 'rupture' (Piault 1987) in some respects. This phenomenon is common to most African states and its manifestations include the quest for privileges ('privilegism'), recourse to intermediaries, contempt for the anonymous service user and use of doublespeak, among others. Another common characteristic is aid dependency: external aid functions as a 'rent', similar in many respects to 'oil rent'.[26] Most African postcolonial states are 'rentier states',[27] and everybody aims to obtain part of this rent. Finally, the features of democratic political life are more or less the same throughout the continent: a multiplicity of political parties, constantly shifting alliances, the implementation of posting and transfer policies on the basis of rewards, interventions or corruption, patronage and clientelism, and more generally failures of collective action (Booth 2012). Permanent suspicion, showdowns and political nomadism are at the core of this modern 'political culture' of Nigerien elites (if we make use of the concept of culture in a non-culturalist and non-traditionalist meaning),[28] and this would also appear to be true of the elites in many other African countries.

If family structure and political structure are so different, why do they have this resemblance, and what does the semantic linking of family rivalries and political

[24]See Périé and Sellier (1950), Hama (1967), Karimou (1977) and Gado (1980).
[25]See Olivier de Sardan (2009b).
[26]But not always: see Collier (2006).
[27]On rentier states in Africa, see Yates (1996) and Olivier de Sardan (2013).
[28]On political culture in Niger, see Hahonou (2010) and Olivier de Sardan (2015d).

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rivalries signify exactly? The first answer is that both are rivalries of proximity, involving social actors constantly moving from one domain to the other. However, it is possible to go beyond this obvious explanation. They are both also characterized by similar practical norms: you should pretend to collaborate with somebody who is in fact your rival. You belong to the same 'family' (kinship-based family or political family) as somebody you suspect of permanently conspiring against you. You cannot avoid living with somebody whom you do not trust. Another expression originating from the kinship vocabulary and also commonly used in Songhay-Zarma language to describe rivalries between politicians is very relevant here: politicians are said to behave like 'co-wives'. Co-wives share a husband and politicians share a political identity (or membership of the very small world of the political elites); however, they are masked adversaries. Formally they must have good relationships with potential enemies who stand among them. These rivalries of proximity are concealed in both cases because they do not comply with public family norms or public political norms.

Experts in the occult: an accelerator?

Another common but perhaps more unexpected factor can be identified that plays an active role in exacerbating antagonisms of proximity: that is, the 'magico-religious entrepreneurs' (i.e. experts in the occult). I use a technically and morally neutral term here; however, they are referred to in Niger using a variety of terms: *féticheurs* (fetish men), *devins* (soothsayers), *charlatans* (quacks) and *marabouts* (Islamic priests) in French; and *zimma* (priests of the spirits and dances of possession), *alfaga* (Qur'anic scholars) and *gunakoy* (soothsayers) in Songhay-Zarma. All of these experts in the occult – who sometimes play the 'animism' card (including geomancy and various forms of pre-Islamic polytheisms), sometimes the card of a certain type of Islam, and sometimes both – are regularly consulted in reaction to the suspected plots of allies and acquaintances, and, in turn, feed suspicions regarding the familial and political entourage.

Once again, polygamy is at the heart of the matter as far as family is concerned. Wives are the devoted clientele of these magicians, to whom they turn not only with requests for successful pregnancies or for retaining the love of their husbands, but also with appeals for protection against the putative manoeuvres of their co-wives. Moreover, they themselves will sometimes request that a certain co-wife be made to have a miscarriage or that another be divorced by the husband. A large number of wives go to consult these magico-religious entrepreneurs on the quiet so that they will make their husbands 'gentle as a sheep' and henceforth compliant with all of their desires. Of course, these traders in occult practices always have 'fetishes' in stock – that is, the necessary magic charms and talismans – and do not fall short when it comes to supplying beneficial or evil incantations, rituals, Qur'anic verses and sacrifices for self-defence and attack. What's more, they also spawn a mechanism of suspicion, defence and counter-attack. A woman comes to see them; she has an unexplained illness, her children are not working well at school, she has had a miscarriage or her business is failing. All self-respecting soothsayers or magicians will always offer the same kind of explanation: your

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co-wife 'maraboutized' you (or bewitched you, or made another magician 'work' against you, and so forth); it was a rival who 'sent' all of these misfortunes your way.

I would now like to shift the focus to the world of politics in this context. An election is looming, and going to the electoral campaign without magic protections would equate to going to the battlefield without a shield and weapons. Hence it is the turn of the politicians to hasten discreetly to the magicians. To win, they must eliminate their opponents. However, they also need to find out whether they have a traitor in their ranks, and to ensure that their supporters will not abandon them and their friends will not change sides. Here, too, magicians invoke the mechanism of suspicion: 'Be careful, there is someone in your circle who is after your place.' In any electoral campaign, 'magico-religious entrepreneurs' rank first among the many actors who benefit from 'electoral rent',[29] and their discourse is always one of ambition, conspiracy, personal achievement, and so on.

In the familial space, as in the political space, it is almost impossible to evade these discreet consultations and occult practices. It is not a question of 'believing' in them or not; that is taken for granted.[30] The woman's sisters or friends will take her to the *zimma*, and to refuse to go would be seen as a sign of contempt or stupidity. Similarly, the politicians' visits to marabouts or soothsayers are organized by their supporters and advisers. Irrespective of whether they are devout Muslims or believers in pagan or other gods, all election candidates must pay Qur'anic students to read the Qur'an publicly and entirely on their behalf and also pay for nocturnal visits to experts in magical practices. The failure to act in this sphere would amount to dismissing their supporters, renouncing local customs and cutting themselves off from the electorate.[31]

It is a vicious cycle in both instances. Familial and political rivalries of proximity prompt recourse to magico-religious entrepreneurs, who reinforce suspicions about the familial or political entourage, which, in turn, intensify rivalries. The *baab-izey* pattern prospers. But does it mean that magical practices are 'explanatory' in relation to political practices? My answer is no; they are merely an 'accelerator' – in other words, a social feature that does not create rivalries of proximity, but amplifies them.

To develop this point, I will attempt to extend my argument beyond Niger. The exacerbation of accusations levelled against the entourage in a register of the occult has, of course, already been thoroughly analysed in African studies and, moreover, in two areas: that is, from the perspectives of both psychiatry or psychoanalysis and that of the anthropology of relationships between witchcraft and politics. Given that the in-depth discussion of these interpretations is beyond the scope of this article, I will content myself with merely mentioning two responses here.

[29]For a description of electoral campaigns in Nigerien rural settings and an analysis of how 'practical norms' regulate the 'game around the rules of the game' (the electoral code), see Olivier de Sardan *et al*. (2015).

[30]It is part of a 'natural attitude' (Schutz 1971).

[31]See the illuminating example of a local politician during an electoral campaign in Makama Bawa (2015).

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A certain specific so-called 'paranoid' disposition has frequently been identified in studies on mental disorders in Africa.[32] What is almost always involved here is the investigation of the entourage, which is suspected of mystical or witchcraft-based attacks. Rather than refer to a contestable 'basic African personality', a traditional culture or a pathological deviation, I would be tempted instead to highlight the significant role played (in Niger, but also in other West African countries) by two contemporary institutions in the familial space: that is, the polygamous family on the one hand, and magico-religious entrepreneurs on the other. Through their combined efforts, these two institutions sustain a permanent tissue of accusation against the entourage. The omnipresence of suspicion in the household and the extended family is largely a product of both of these institutions.

On the other hand, certain anthropologists and political scientists – mostly on the basis of Cameroonian data[33] – have focused on the role of witchcraft (more specifically accusations of witchcraft) in political life as an expression of the quest for power, or, conversely, as anti-power, and made it a central dimension of African political culture in different respects. However, apart from the fact that the Cameroonian context is very different from the Nigerien one in this regard (and cannot be applied to the continent as a whole), it appears to me to be difficult to read politics 'through' occult practices as though the latter had an explanatory role.[34] Instead, I would merely see occult practices as an 'accelerator' of the agonistic characteristics of political life.

Conclusion

Because politics in Niger reduces itself to incessant conflicts between persons and factions who lack broader perspectives, it can be reduced, in turn, to mere *baab-izey* intrigues and all that they involve – including the use of magico-religious entrepreneurs. This is precisely the accusation levelled at the political elite by an increasing proportion of the population: this elite thinks only of itself, is only interested in gaining power or staying in power, and only dreams of getting richer. Politics is reduced to an infernal cycle of clashes between coteries, reconciliations, sharing, frustrations, transhumance and new clashes.

Many people in Niger contrast this political culture with the sense of public good that constitutes the official norm in this respect. They conclude that there is a need to renew the elites and develop civic spirit and an imperative to reform the state. Others, in contrast, dream of jihad, a political *umma* and a caliphate. These are the two conflicting ways of eliminating the widespread *baab-izey-tarey* that have emerged in the very small political world of contemporary Niger. This *baab-izey* pattern is clearly an empirical refutation of a large body of writings on African politics and policies that characterize them as primarily

[32]See Zempléni (1975).
[33]See Bayart (1989) and Geschiere (1997).
[34]For a criticism of this 'construction of the occult', see Ranger (2007); for a criticism of the argumentation regarding the 'devouring' metaphor, see Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006).

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shaped by traditional solidarities and family or ethnic allegiances and as leaving no room for the individual.[35] In many ways, reality reveals the exact opposite: individual conflicts and personal strategies are to the fore, at least in the view of a majority of citizens. Of course, this is not exclusive to patron–client relations, group allegiances or parochial solidarities, which have been widely studied. However, both must be taken into consideration.

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[35]See Chabal and Daloz (1998) and Schatzberg (2001). For a criticism of this 'Africanist traditional culturalism', see Olivier de Sardan (2015c).

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Abstract

In Niger, there is an increasing rejection of *politik* (a term with highly pejorative connotations): that is, party politics and the politics of democracy, characterized by personal rivalries and power struggles between clans and factions. But there is a direct link (albeit not a causal one) between the social perceptions of intra-familial rivalries and the social perceptions of political rivalries. The archetypical relationship among the *baab-izey* (children of one father but different mothers) is characterized by competition and jealousy. This is a product of the latent rivalry that pits co-wives against each other. Polygamy is clearly at odds with a number of received ideas and clichés about 'the African family' as primarily a locus of support and solidarity. Such formal social norms may reign in public situations, but in private de facto practical norms give rise to subtle discriminations and the omnipresence of more or less hidden conflicts within the family. The same is true for the political microcosm of Niger. While the public norm of the concern for the public good is supposed to regulate political behaviours, rivalry and jealousy are structural components of the political world. The *baab-izey* pattern is frequently used in reference to politicians. Political conflicts are above all personal/factional conflicts in which friends and supporters are implicated, and are rivalries of proximity. In the familial space as in the political space, 'magico-religious entrepreneurs' (i.e. experts in the occult) are merely an 'accelerator' of these conflicts: they reinforce suspicions about the familial or political entourage, which, in turn, intensify rivalries.

Résumé

Au Niger, "*politik*" est devenu dans les langues locales un terme très péjoratif, associé à la démocratie, qui connote les conflits de personnes et de factions associés aux partis politiques. Mais il y a un lien (qui n'est pas causal) entre la perception des conflits au sein de la famille et la perception des conflits au sein de la classe politique. La relation archétypale entre « *baab-izey* », enfants d'un même père et de mère différentes, est caractérisée par la jalousie et la compétition. C'est une conséquence de la rivalité entre co-épouses. La polygamie contredit les clichés sur la famille africaine comme étant essentiellement un espace de solidarité. Ces clichés peuvent correspondre aux normes officielles en situation publique, mais, dans les comportements privés, les normes pratiques introduisent des discriminations subtiles et une omniprésence de conflits plus ou moins cachés au sein de la famille. Il en est de même au sein du microcosme politique nigérien. Alors que les normes officielles du souci du bien public sont censées régner, l'ambition personnelle, la rivalité et la jalousie sont des composantes structurelles de la vie politique. Le modèle du *baab-izey* est très souvent utilisé pour décrire les comportements des politiciens. Les conflits politiques sont surtout des conflits de personnes et de factions, impliquant amis et clients. Ce sont des rivalités de proximité.

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Dans l'espace familial comme dans l'espace politique, des « entrepreneurs magico-religieux » (spécialistes de l'occulte) jouent un rôle d'accélérateur de ces conflits. Ils renforcent les soupçons à l'égard de l'entourage, ce qui, en retour, intensifie les rivalités de proximité.

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