

THE USE OF THE MOBILE PHONE FOR RELIGIOUS MOBILIZATION IN NIGER REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

While many scholars have studied the ways in which the Internet and online social networks are shaping contemporary religious practices and how new information and communication technologies are supporting networked forms of religious activism, only a few have analyzed the relationships between religion and the use of the mobile phone in African countries. However, in Africa as elsewhere, mobile phones are influencing the everyday practices of religion in multiple ways that are not simply anecdotal but affect beliefs and behaviors and raise ethical concerns among believers. In some cases (e.g., divorce, Qur'an verses, ringtones, prayer disruption), religious authorities have been obliged to draw up rules and provide guidance to the faithful. This article seeks to identify the opportunities offered and the challenges posed to religion by the introduction of mobile phones in Niamey, the capital-city of Niger Republic. It specifically examines how believers are using this device to mobilize co-religionists, to maintain religious ties and religious faith, as well as how they are coping with the challenges and seeking to resolve related issues. The article argues that the mobile phone is helping mediate in new ways and in a new context the religious norms and behaviors that have always guided Muslim communities. In other words, the advent of the mobile phone offers new opportunities but also poses new challenges to believers who strive to cope with this new phenomenon by inventing new ways to integrate the device into everyday practices. The article is based on semi-structured interviews carried out in June, July, and August 2009 in Niger's capital city, Niamey, with ordinary Nigerien Muslims. It combines qualitative data obtained through interviews and observation with demographic statistics and survey results to describe the role the mobile phone plays in the current evolution of Islam in Niger.

KEYWORDS

Islam, Niger, Mobile Phone, Religious Practices, Religious Behaviors

1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeriens are overwhelmingly Muslim. In this West African country, counting now (2017), more than 21 million inhabitants, 98% of people claimed to be Muslims in each of the censuses conducted since independence in 1960 (Institut National de la Statistique 2012). However, although Islam has been present in Niger since the eighth century (Hamani, 2007), it has never enjoyed the widespread influence it exerts on the daily practices and behaviors of contemporary Nigeriens. The last three decades, in particular, have been marked by the rising influence of Islamist intellectuals and theologians, as well as the massive adhesion of the westernized elite and rural populations to Islamic teachings and proselytism (Niandou-Souley & Alzouma, 1996). Among the main factors that help explain the spread of Islam in Niger are the development and fast-growing use of information technologies. Indeed, well before the advent of the Internet and mobile phones, first the radio and then television were the means of expression used by governments and Ulemas to deliver a version of Sunni Islam (described as "moderate") to the Nigerien people, whose proximity with neighboring Nigeria exposed them to forms of religious devotion deemed "extremist" by public authorities. Thus, under

the dictatorial regime of Seyni Kountché (1974-1987), a close collaboration existed between religious elites and governments through the *Association Islamique du Niger* (Islamic Association of Niger; AIN), an organization created in the image of the single party. The AIN was supposed to aggregate all Nigerien Muslims and to instruct them on how to behave in their daily lives when faced with various ethical and religious problems (Triaud, 1982; Niandou-Souley & Alzouma, 1996). The AIN conducted weekly religious broadcasts led by the late Sheikh Omar Ismail, who was one of the greatest religious figures of contemporary Niger until his death in October 2012. Later in the 1990s, with the advent of democracy, political pluralism, and freedom of the press, many private radio stations and free newspaper articles emerged, some of which had a religious character. The advent of democracy also corresponded to an era of Islamic renewal in Niger (Niandou-Souley & Alzouma, 1996) with the emergence of multiple religious organizations and an Islamist press publishing many newspaper articles and books. In addition, a new breed of religious scholars appeared (Niandou-Souley, 1993), preaching and delivering all kinds of sermons through the use of cassettes and later CDs and DVDS, as well as broadcast or televised daily or weekly religious programs that were animated by various Islamic currents, leading to a situation similar to that which Hirschkind (2006) presented elsewhere as an ‘ethical soundscape’ that created an Islamic counter-public.

It can therefore be said that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are being used by believers to boost the spread and renewal of Islam in Niger by providing the faithful with new platforms for the expression of religious devotion. However, to date, very little scholarly attention has been given to the role that ICTs, and particularly the mobile phone, play in the daily lives of religious communities and believers in African countries such as Niger. The ways in which mobile phones are challenging everyday practices of religion and religious behaviors (ways that are not simply anecdotal but raise ethical concerns among believers) have remained singularly under-studied.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this article, the author used qualitative interviews and personal observations to analyze the meanings associated with the introduction of the mobile phone among urban Muslim users of that technical object in Niger. The four main questions that guided the research and the conversations with the respondents were the following:

1. Do you or any co-religionist you know use the mobile phone, purposefully or not, in ways you think help foster daily religious practices and maintain and reinforce religious beliefs and religious bonds?
2. What are those ways and what are those religious purposes?
3. Are there any aspects of the mobile phone that you think have a positive influence on religious practices?
4. Are there any aspects of the mobile phone that you think have a negative influence (challenges) on religious practices?

It should be noted that the questions were not limited to these although all the conversations revolved around them. The author tried, every time it was possible, to deepen the understanding of respondents’ views with new questions inspired by their answers that arose on the spot.

The research terrain was Niamey, the capital-city of Niger. Forty Nigerien urban Muslims who were users of mobile phones were randomly selected and interviewed at the exit of mosques after the Friday collective prayer in five consecutive weeks in June, July, and August 2009. The reason why believers were interviewed at the exit of mosques after the collective prayer on Friday is that these conditions provided better chances to include

Nigerien Muslims of all social standings, cultural groups, and religious affiliations in the sample. Indeed, Friday prayers are when poor and rich people of all ethnic and linguistic backgrounds gather without distinction to pray together. Thus, the risk of including people who were too socially or linguistically similar was reduced. However, this did not entirely eliminate that risk because not only were the respondents city dwellers, but they were also all male users of the mobile phone and none was under the age of 20. This is explained by the fact that a male researcher having a long conversation with a Muslim woman outside her home is sensitive in the Nigerien religious and cultural context. As for people younger than 20, it is unlikely that they would have been active in proselytizing Islam, although they could have been the targets of the proselytizing.

It should also be noted that many expressions of Islam and different Islamic organizations and affiliations exist in Niger. This is manifested by people being attached to certain mosques for reasons that have to do with their residence and for reasons that have to do with their religious affiliation and allegiance to particular Ulemas. Thus, Friday prayers are usually led by Ulemas who are known to have specific religious affiliations in mosques that are associated with specific doctrinal allegiances. For that reason, the interviews took place in two mosques known to have different doctrinal affiliations: A Shi'a mosque located in the district of North-Lazaret and known as Karbala and the Abi Ubeida Bin Jara Wahhabi mosque located in the district of Boukoki. However, the interviewer did not try to relate the respondents' responses to their Islamic affiliations as this would have driven them to discuss religious views, although it will appear that different individual respondents gave different answers (and expressed different opinions) with regard to the questions.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the interviews were conducted in French with Nigerien French speakers who, as a social group, clearly differ from the bulk of the population because they are educated and usually belong to the higher strata of society. The interviews were translated from French to English by the author.

For all these reasons, the conclusions drawn from this study cannot be extrapolated to all Nigerien Muslims with the exactitude attached to quantitative studies, although the author is confident that they are representative of the general opinions circulating among Nigerien urban Muslims in Niamey who are users of mobile phones.

3. MOBILE PHONES IN NIGER

According to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2011 Niger was among the two countries, with Chad, that had the lowest ICT indicator (IDI), an index that "captures progress made in regard to ICT infrastructure, use and skills" (International Telecommunication Union, 2012, p.iii). However, if the overall use of ICTs is very low in Niger, the use of mobile phones is relatively high even compared with many other African countries. Very recently, in November 2013, the *Autorité de Régulation des Télécommunications et des Postes* (ARTP- Higher Authority for the Regulation of Telecommunication and Post Offices) conducted a nationwide census of mobile phone users in Niger to officially identify them and register them to prevent criminal use of this device. Previously, in October 2012, a deadline of one year had been fixed for all users of mobile phones to officially identify themselves. The results of those operations, made public on November 24, 2013, indicate that 5,443,914 users officially registered and that 1,728,225 users had their subscriptions permanently terminated for failing to comply with the deadline. Thus, one can conclude that more than seven million users of mobile phones existed in Niger by that time (2012), a figure that corresponded then to 40% of the total population of the country. In addition, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the actual percentage of users is far higher particularly because, in families and communities, the collective use of mobile phones is widespread. However, important disparities exist between male users and

female users as well as between city dwellers and rural populations. For example, a study commissioned in 2009 by the Institut National de la Statistique (INS-National Institute of Statistics) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) found that 57.8% of people in Niamey were mobile phone users. According to that study, overall, 52.2% of people living in urban settings used mobile phones while only 13% of those living in rural areas did so (Institut National de la Statistique & Programme des Nations Unies pour le Développement, 2009).

When it comes to how and for what purposes mobile phones are used in Niger, calling and receiving calls (Alzouma, 2006; 2008; 2013) with the practice of beeping appear to be the main uses. However, like elsewhere in Africa, scholars have observed increasing diversification in uses of mobile phones to a wide range of activities and social practices.

Salient among those practices is the use of mobile phones for religious purposes, particularly to spread Islam, create new religious communities, and maintain and strengthen religious bonds.

Nevertheless, although the mobile phone may help spread Islam, it may also challenge everyday practices of religion and religious behaviors in multiple ways. Thus, this article will particularly focus on two aspects of mobile phone use: how the device is helping to further Islam in Niger and how believers are coping with the “disruptive” character of the mobile phone and seeking to resolve related issues.

Some of the ways mobile phone is helping further Islam in Niger are the following:

- The creation of new applications targeting Muslim communities and meant to guide and facilitate everyday religious practices for the believers.
- The creation of applications that are meant to help better understand or deepen the understanding of their religion by believers.
- The use of the mobile phone as a way of “keeping in touch” with fellow coreligionists
- The use of the mobile phone to constantly remind the believer of his (her) religious duties (with chanted religious ring tones, times for prayers, etc.).
- The use of the mobile phone as a way of sharing religious information.
- The use of the device as a way of connecting to Islamic websites
- And finally the use of the mobile phone as a way of recruiting new converts

In contrast, some of the challenges posed by the mobile phone for the everyday practice of religion are the following:

- The ambivalent nature of technical objects (including the mobile phone) that makes it possible to use it for anti-religious purposes (i.e. the “weakening” of patriarchal control on women such as mentioned by some respondents).
- Prayer disruptions: the phone calling while believers are praying.
- The use of smartphones to visit websites that promote or feature acts and behaviors that are seen by the believers as “immoral” such as lottery (gambling), online pornography, etc.
- The possibility to use the mobile phone to spread rumors that may threaten the unity of the Ummah (community of believers).
- The use of mobile phones for violent activities such as terrorism.

Because of this ambivalent character of the mobile phone use (such as mentioned above), this paper argues that the mobile phone is not only reshaping religious practices and helping mediate in new ways and in a new context the religious norms and behaviors that have always guided Nigerien Muslim communities. The mobile phone is also posing new

challenges to believers who are striving to cope with this new phenomenon by inventing new ways to integrate it into everyday religious practices.

4. RELIGION, MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY: A BRIEF APPRAISAL

Religious communication is an integral aspect of religious activities. Religious leaders and proselytizing movements have always used all kinds of information and communication devices to reach out to their audiences. Consequently, over the last two decades, religious studies scholars and specialists of religion and media and/or technology in various disciplines have increasingly devoted attention to the use of ICTs in religious activities.

In the 1990s and 2000s, for many scholars working in the field of religion and media (Schroeder et al., 1998; Brasher, 2001; Højsgaard & Warburg, 2005; Campbell, 2006a), the Internet was the primary object of scientific enquiry. In this perspective, their research first focused on online religious platforms (websites) and the Internet usage by religious communities (Brasher, 2001); researchers also worked on “the transformations that were affecting religious authority and conflict in the age of the Internet” (Højsgaard & Warburg, 2005), and “religious identity construction and group formation dynamics within the online settings of the Internet” (Højsgaard & Warburg, 2005). Seemingly, some other authors examined how technology (or the Internet) was reshaping religious practices (O’Leary & Brasher, 1996), while others (Campbell, 2006b; 2010) sought to look beyond what MacKenzie and Wacjman (1999) called “the social shaping of technology” paradigm. In this perspective, Campbell notes that “more than reshaping the practice of religion, I would argue that the uptake of new media by religious practitioners and the resulting forms of online religion point to larger cultural shifts at work in the practice and perception of religion in society...a move towards a “lived religion”, where media resources serve as tools to help redefine religious practice in contemporary life”. (Campbell, 2010).

In the middle and late 2000s, with the increasing rise of religious fundamentalist and violent movements in the Muslim World, scholars’ attention shifted to religious forms of digital activism and digital mobilization. Many authors (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005; Weimann, 2006; Campbell, 2012) strived to unveil how the Internet was being used as an instrument for religious education, for religious propaganda, ideological platform and as a tool for recruitment. At the same time, the advent of social media networking sites (Facebook, Youtube, and more recently WhatsApp), and the quasi-universal use of mobile phones, opened a new field of research, especially with regard to the role that these devices (and sometimes religion) played in the revolutions that shook the Arab world (the Arab Spring), and in various other movements throughout Europe and America. Researchers such as Eltantawy and Wiest (2011), Harlow (2012), Yamamoto et al. (2015), or Enjolras et al. (2013), have devoted numerous articles to the use of social media (and even mobile phones) in the developing world, especially in the areas of political and religious mobilizations. In Africa, the role played by the use of mobile phones in ethnic conflicts, political crises, as well as religious transformations also became a topic of interest for some authors (Makinene & Kuira, 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2015).

However, as far as the developing world and particularly Sub-Saharan Africa were concerned, until the late 2000s, only a few studies have been devoted to the relationship that exists between the use of ICTs and religion. Although the role of radio and television has long been studied in Christian Africa (De Witte, 2005; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005) as well as Muslim Africa (Abubakar, 2008), and although scholarly attention and a notable theoretical development have been paid to the importance of cassettes (Hirschkind, 2006), CDs and DVDs in religious mobilization in Africa, the role of the Internet, and particularly the role of mobile phones, remained poorly studied. More importantly, as stated by Ihejirika (2009, p. 2), until the organization of the International Conference on New Media and Religious

Transformations in Africa, held in Abuja, Nigeria, in July 2008, the related field was characterized by a lack of an African perspective on how ICTs were influencing religious practices in Africa. Thus, until then, according to Ihejirika, two theoretical views dominated the field: the transmission paradigm “which sees the media as the carrier of meaning from the message sender in order to recreate the meaning in the mind of the receiver” (Ihejirika, 2009, p. 2) and “the culturalist perspective... (that) suggests that audience analysis must ask what meanings are created in the context of mediation”. (Ihejirika, 2009, p. 2). After the identification of the shortcomings related to these views and a long review of various works related to religion and media in Africa, Ihejirika proposes what he calls “the convergence theory” in which “certain events, actions, or persons help to mediate the union between the old traditional root paradigms and the current lived social realities in which the individual tries to forge a coherent identity”. (2009, p. 42). However, Ihejirika’s perspective seems to lack a specific focus on and on-ground analysis of the actual use of ICTs such as mobile phones.

This paper seeks to contribute to filling such a gap by focusing on everyday uses of mobile phones among Muslims in Niger Republic. In this perspective, it should be noted that Niandou-Souley & Alzouma (1996) were among the first authors to have analyzed the religious mediascape in Niger Republic, particularly the weekly broadcasted preaches of Influential Ulemas in the 1990s and the expanding use of cassettes, CDs, and DVDs in religious mobilization. However, the use of mobile phones is now pervasive in Niger and the use of the Internet is very fast growing and also, in Niger as elsewhere, they are contributing to transforming in many ways religious activities. It is therefore time for scholars of media (particularly ICTs) and religion in Niger to investigate this new phenomenon.

5. FURTHERING THE UMMA UNITY: MOBILE PHONE APPLICATIONS AND ISLAM

The role that mobile phones can play in the spread of religion, the creation of new religious communities, and the maintenance and strengthening of religious bonds can particularly be seen in the features and functionalities of new generation mobile phones such as the 3G (or 4G), which in some cases have Islamic applications and interfaces purposefully designed to target Muslim communities. As earlier noted by Bunt (2010, p. 3), some of these applications are related to “qibla direction, prayer times, Qur’an recitations and readings, hadith collections, and biographies of the Prophet Muhammad”. Indeed numerous other “Islam-oriented applications and programs” (Bunt, 2010, p. 3) exist and are being used by Muslims to expand their reach and influence practices in accordance with the original universalist vocation of Islam that sought, in its early days, to become “the sole religion of Mankind” (Bennison, 2002, p. 75).

In the case of Niger, although most of the mobile phones the respondents showed the author were poorly equipped second-hand devices used to call and receive calls, some had the above-mentioned functionalities. Those applications are part of what the respondents called “the positive aspects of mobile phones” because of the possibilities they offer to further the Umma (the transnational Muslim community) and to unite Muslims, as opposed to those that have a “disruptive character” for Muslims. For example, when asked what they consider the most important uses of the mobile phone with regard to Islam and Muslims, most respondents responded that the mobile phone is first used by believers to keep in touch. It enables them to maintain existing bonds, particularly religious bonds. Others added that the mobile phone also provides the possibility of reaffirming and reinforcing Islamic principles in sayings and deeds and in many other circumstances.

Such is the case for A.D. a 39 journalist, who states: “With mobile phones, we Muslims can easily share information such as the sighting of the moon during fasting periods, or some important dates such as Arafat, Ashura, etc”.

M.C., a 44 years old computer scientists, adds: “Mobile phone gives the possibility to stay in permanent contact with other Muslims”.

5.1. Religious Greetings, Religious Ringtones, Icons, and Quotations from the Qur’an

From this perspective, one of the examples given by most respondents is the Islamic greeting. Today, when you call somebody in Niger, instead of the traditional “Allô!” as answer to a phone call, you are likely to hear "Assalamu alaikum", as an answer. The Islamic greeting "Assalamu alaikum" means “peace be upon you”. It is used to assert one’s religious identity and faith and is recognized by all Muslims across the world as a mark of belonging to the Umma, the worldwide Islamic community, particularly when the other interlocutor responds “Wa laikum assalam” (“and peace be upon you”). For Muslims, greeting each other that way is a divine recommendation and answering the greeting is obligatory. The Prophet is believed to have said, “Spread the Salam, the Islamic greeting among you!” It is so because “Assalamu alaikum” is a reaffirmation of the ties that unite Muslims, a religious obligation, as well as a way to make religion a fact of life and to remind one of the existence of God. It is also a way for Muslims to confirm their faith.

Thus, with the Islamic greeting, religion becomes the invisible substrate of the conversation that will take place between "two brothers (or sisters) in religion." In a country like Niger, in the media, and in the political and religious context of today where Islam occupies, so to speak, a “center-stage”, everyone sees that it is cogent that two interlocutors address each other this way because the religious greeting indicates, above all, a reaffirmation of religious solidarity. Today, thanks to the mobile phone, this religious greeting is done both in the form of a verbal response but also in the form of a short message service (SMS). More importantly, the religious greeting indicates “the appropriate way” to use the mobile phone among Muslims as opposed to the traditional and more Western “Allô!”. It reaffirms, maintains, and reinforces Muslim etiquette as a brand of religious identity.

This also appears in the way most of the respondents have replaced musical ringtones with the Muslim ringtones that numerous Internet sites offer for download free of charge and which usually are various versions of "Allahu Akbar" (God is [the] Greatest!), of the first verse of the Qur’an, of calls to prayer, or of various names of God. Ringtones have become symbols that reinforce the religion and serve as a reminder to the faithful of their religious duties. As one of the respondents said:

As stated by S.A, a 45 years old teacher, “the religious ringtone permanently recalls us to our Islamic identity, what we share in common as Muslims. Using it is per se Islamic”.

For these respondents, the mobile phone has thus become the material support for religious practices, an instrument for maintaining, nurturing, and strengthening a shared spiritual life. In the same way that the Internet has played the role of an organizational platform through the creation of online religious groups and mailing lists (Campbell, 2006b), the mobile phone is used as a link between individuals but also among the numerous religious groups, often loosely bound, that exist in Niamey, such as groups for the study of the Qur’an or groups organized around particular influential Ulemas, whose members are bound together by a particular school of thought. Here, the mobile phone supports and strengthens real-life religious groups by mediating interrelationships, particularly those of a religious character. According to the respondents, some of the most common religious activities supported by the mobile phone include (a) sharing information about religious events of common interest, (b) helping in memorizing the Qu’ran, (c) listening to religious songs, sermons, preachings, and Qur’an verses, using the incorporated radio, (d) connecting to Islamic websites, and (e)

recruiting new converts and spreading the faith. The meanings associated with each of these activities are discussed below.

5.2. Sharing Information about Religious Events of Common Interest

Examples of sharing information as indicated by the respondents include sharing information about strictly religious events such as the visit of a renowned Ulema, organized sermons, and even media events such as religious movies or documentaries of religious importance by calling each other, sending SMS, or photographs, etc. Some respondents also cited social events such baptisms of newborn children, marriages, and funeral ceremonies, which all require that the good Muslim express his/her emotion with other fellow “co-religionists” as a way to secure God’s rewards. In this perspective, respondents indicated, for example, that most of the messages and calls they receive from other members of their religious groups are related to such events. These are usually group SMSs received from people who belong to the same network of acquaintances. Thus, by resorting to mobile phones to keep in touch, the phones create new sites of sociability and help maintain older sites:

“I frequently receive messages from relatives, friends, or other students of my Mallam (Ulema in the Hausa language) informing me about preachings, conferences, or social events such as funerary ceremonies and baptisms, or simply regular invitations to come and socialize together”, says H.A.M, a legal practitioner.

For his part, S.B, a housekeeper, adds: “Those calls and regular gatherings are very important for me because they help strengthen the relationships between us, to stay in contact and to exchange and deepen what we have learned from our common Mallam”.

I.L.K, a friend, colleague, and co-religionist of S.B. too adds: “When one of us who is known as being poor loses a close relative, we usually call for monetary contributions from the members to help him going through the first months of the loss. These recommendations of our Mallam are well appreciated, particularly by those who are left alone with children”.

The strength of the religious groups’ ties in large part relates to the frequency of interactions among their members and how regularly they demonstrate their commitment to the group’s objectives by their presence at ceremonies of baptism, marriage, or bereavement, and, in full body, their membership in the group and their loyalty to other members, including through gifts and contributions of all kinds.

5.3. Help in Memorizing the Holy Qur’an

In the Islamic religion, memorizing and reciting the Qur’an is a virtue, and it is necessary to know at least a few verses to perform the five daily prayers. Audio recitations of the Qur’an or portions of the Qur’an appear in many forms: in the form of a ringtone, for example, where the first verse of the Qur’an is usually heard recited when the phone starts ringing. Audio recitations can also be accessed online using mobile phones. They also appear under the form of SMSs sent to users, usually translated from Arabic to French. These verses are used in many ways, but they usually come as supports in ordinary exchanges to illustrate arguments, reinforce commitments, or identify religious membership. As one interviewee said:

“Even simple messages that have no religious purposes are sometimes accompanied by Qur’an verses in order to give force to what the interlocutor is saying or to show that what he/she is saying is in line with the recommendations of the Prophet or to urge us to take action” (A.A.B., high school teacher, 34 years old).

Thus, one can say that those messages are part of efforts geared toward emphasizing Islamic or moral values and regulating relationships with co-religionists and the wider society. They are used to maintain, on the one hand, religious allegiances and, on the other, communal ties and appurtenances to real-life social groups. Indeed, socially grounded religious affiliations and electronically based virtual and mobile networks are two sides of the same coin; they reinforce each other.

However, the respondents also indicated that groups and networks that constitute the fabric of today's Nigerien Islam do not amount to a monolithic "national" Islam as under the dictatorial regime of Seyni Kountché (1974-1987). What we have today is a plurality of Islamic organizational networks in which the members often identify themselves with particular Islamic orders or even particular *Mallamai* (Ulemas). After the democratization of the Nigerien society and the liberalization of the communication sector, numerous free newsarticles and free radios emerged with their own political (and sometimes also) religious affiliations. Indeed, almost every single free radio in Niger also has an Ulema attached to it who broadcasts on a daily or weekly basis his preachings, which are heard by those affiliated with his religious school. It goes without saying that those radio networks are also mobile networks and even (albeit rarely) virtual networks that participate in the creation and consolidation of the group identity. These networks manifest the existence of competing visions of Islam along the dividing lines of urban Islam (modern Ulemas trained in Middle Eastern Islamic universities) versus rural Islam (traditional local "marabouts"); Shi'ite Islam versus Sunni Islam; or even lines of ethnic and linguistic loyalties (sermons being given in the various local languages). Thus, the mobile phone and other ICTs participated in the fragmentation or diversification of Islam as well as group and religious consciousness. As say H.A.R, a French-Arabic teacher,

"You know, under Kountché, not all mallamai (Ulemas) could make themselves heard on the state radio and the state television. It was a small number of them who had the monopoly of the definition of Islam. They were the only ones who were authorized to say what Islam was, what to think about Islam, and how to understand and interpret Islamic precepts. Nowadays, you have as many "voices" as radios and televisions. Nobody is recognized as the exclusive holder of the Islamic truth or speech".

If this monopoly on the authorized and authoritative Islamic word could be exercised under Kountché, it was because the dissenting voices could be dispossessed of the means of production and transmission of Islamic knowledge, the instruments that confer authority, legitimacy, and power, namely, radio and television and today's instruments, such as the Internet and mobile phones.

5.4. Sharing Religious Songs, Sermons, and Qur'an Verses

When asked what kinds of exchanges they use the mobile phone for, most respondents cited a wide variety of exchanges among which religious songs, sermons, and Qur'an verses were particularly sought for the interest they hold for believers. Those who discover something new or important never hesitate to share it by sending messages, registering them, or debating them. This is the case for sermons and religious songs that are widely and daily broadcast and for which propagation and sharing is made easier by the use of ICTs.

Indeed, memorizing and exchanging religious songs and chanted sermons are an important aspect of religious life and the propagation of Islam in Niger. As Abdou said, "In Niger, there is a remarkable presence of religious songs: calls to canonical prayers, litanies of young *talibes* (students), psalmodies chanted in groups by Ulemas during 'zikrs' (Ed.: invocations of Allah), songs still released today during religious ceremonies, mourning songs,

or theme songs (tunes) that begin broadcast or televised religious programs; all those religious songs generally have a common trait: they encourage believers to meditate and to get on the path of Islam” (Abdou, 2011, p. 194-195). Indeed, the creation and dissemination of religious songs are practices deeply rooted in Nigerien religious traditions (Norris, 1990). The tradition of writing and transmitting chanted sermons and poems is a long one. In the history of the country, writing religious songs and poems has been (and is still) an important part of Islamic intellectual activities since the introduction of that religion between the eighth and ninth centuries (Hamani, 2007; Abdou, 2011). These religious songs and chanted poems embodied the political and religious thought of renowned Ulemas. They were part of the way in which the religion was propagated in societies where only a few people knew how to read and write.

Their main propagators were wandering mystics of the Sufi order and roaming beggars who, until today, are found everywhere in Niger, from street corners in cities to the remotest villages in rural areas. Thousands of those poems and songs still exist in Niger’s private libraries, where they are part of local traditional written literature known as *ajamis*. Some of them date as far back as the 15th century. *Ajamis* are usually written in local languages using Arabic scripture. They are also memorized and transmitted from generation to generation by members of religious communities. Some of the most important historical and religious figures of the country, such as Usman Dan Fodio and Mahaman Diobbo, and all religious and political figures of the first half of the 19th century are principally known as writers and authors of poems and religious songs (Moumouni, 2008; Abdou, 2011).

Note that most begging in Niger is done through chants that have a deep religious nature. Religious begging in Niger takes different forms; for example, Islamic traditional schools make it obligatory for their *talibes* (students) to beg to sustain themselves and their master. Islam also makes it a duty to show solidarity toward handicapped persons whose condition forces them to beg. Two of the most important sermons chanted by beggars in Niger are the sermons of Sumaila Mufaza (in Zarma language) and the sermon of Mallama Aishatu Inno (in Hausa language). Sumaila Mufaza was a roaming beggar of the first half of the 20th century who belonged to the Nyassism order and who became especially famous in West Niger. Chanted in the local Zarma language, his sermons are widely aired on radio and television. Hajia was a northern Nigerian woman who became famous in Niger after her chanted sermon aired during the burial ceremonies of Seyni Kountché, former president of Niger. Her sermon is chanted in the local Hausa language. These two chanted sermons are known beyond their traditional auditory audiences and have national and even international reach.

Thus, new ICTs make it easier to exchange and spread chanted sermons and poems. More importantly, since they have a global reach, the Nigerien traditional corpus of chanted sermons and poems is being enriched by transnational Islamic networks that make available foreign popular corpuses. This also is a manifestation of the transformation that affects the religious elite which, today, is mainly composed of highly educated religious preachers mostly trained in Middle Eastern universities who also maintain “complex transnational ties and sometimes affiliations” (Soares, 2005, p. 85; see also Niandou-Souley, 1993; Niandou-Souley & Alzouma, 1996). When it comes to the global circulation of religious songs, in Niger, neighboring northern Nigeria and Sudan are the two most important providers of chanted sermons. Sudanese songs, in particular, constitute a good portion of the musical cassettes found everywhere in Niger. Because globalization is widely seen as the imposition of Western cultural imperialism, of which American and European songs are considered to be the most obvious manifestations, the possession of chanted Islamic sermons and poems is seen by believers as Islamic counterculture or resistance to cultural imperialism:

As says, M.O, an Arabic teacher, “We as Muslims, we have our own traditions and our own songs. They are not just for entertainment. They don’t divert us. They are not only good hearing. They also guide us on the right path”.

S.D. a student, adds: “To tell you the truth, me, I like listening to rap. Actually I like rap, especially when they have some Islamic content. But our Islamic songs are also good. They are as good as any other song. Me, I have no preference although we are usually urged to side away from bad rap and other similar songs and dance traditions”.

At stake here is the Muslim identity and how it is framed in the context of globalization that is seen by believers as “a world full of temptations”. Spreading the Islamic corpus of songs contributes to the framing and maintenance of the religious identity, which religious groups see as one of their main goals. As Hakan Yavuz said, “Islamic social movements...concentrate on personal aspects of human life. They seek to use Islam to punctuate, monitor, and control arenas of daily life: what Muslims eat, read, wear, and enjoy, and how they behave” (Yavuz, 2003, p. 26). Every faithful has the duty to participate in the construction and maintenance of “inner and outer boundaries” (Yavuz, 2003, p. 27) that separate Muslims from others. Of course, cultural consumption habits are one of the most important arenas in which this battle is being waged and ICTs, among which are mobile phones, are the instruments for the production and reproduction of this religious identity. In Niger, it is, among other things, in the traditional repertoire of religious songs that Muslims find the identity markers that are destined to be disseminated and appropriated by the faithful.

5.5. Connecting to Islamic Websites

The advent of 3G mobile phones (third-generation mobile telecommunications) that allow for voice, audio, radio, video, texting, and multiple other purposes, such as access to the Internet and mobile TV, extended the possibility for religious communities to further the links among members. The possibility of accessing the Internet via a mobile phone is one of the most important applications for mobile devices. According to Bunt, “Mobile phones have become one of the most significant interfaces for internet use, especially given their role as facilitating access for previously marginalized populations and individuals” (Bunt, 2010). However, in Niger, Internet users form only a tiny part of the population. According to the World Bank (2013), only 1.4% of Nigeriens were using the Internet in 2012.

Several factors help explain this situation: First, more than 60% of people in Niger live on less than a dollar a day and cannot afford to buy computers or even to surf the Internet in cybercafés. Telecommunication infrastructures are located in cities and are out of the reach of most Nigerien citizens. Also, most people do not know how to read and write, particularly in Western languages such as French and English that also are some of the most important languages of the Internet. Although the quasi-totality of people in Niger is Muslim, most people practice Islam without knowing how to read Arabic, and when they do, this does not translate into an understanding of the Arabic language because they learned classical Arabic, which differs from modern Arabic, the Arabic used in today’s media. Thus, even well-versed Ulemas, particularly in rural areas, are not always able to converse in Arabic.

However, as previously indicated, the social composition of Nigerien religious specialists has radically changed in the last four decades. The expansion of French-Arabic schools known as madrasas produced a breed of highly educated Islamic intellectuals who not only have been trained in Middle Eastern universities and therefore in Arabic, but also read French because Nigerien madrasas are “a compromise between French schools and Arabic education” (Triaud, 1982), with students being trained in the two languages.

Therefore, owing to the development of communication technologies, the advent of democracy, and the development of a civil society, new Islamic organizations led by well-educated Ulemas preaching in French, the language of the former colonizer, are spreading all over the country. Thus, paradoxically, Western education and culture are playing an important role in the Westernized elite's adhesion to Islam since this social group is the primary group targeted by sermons given in French. The young breed of Islamic theologians is converting the prestige attached to French culture and the French language into a kind of bargaining tool that helps convert people who in previous decades were mostly under the influence of Marxist and Western ideologies of secularism. While they were unknown in the past, sermons given in French have become commonplace since an erudite Ulema known as Hassane Diallo started airing sermons in French in the early 1990s. The popularity of sermons and preachings in French comes from the prestige attached to the French language because it is also the language of the administration and the language of the governing elites. In addition, delivering sermons in French helps the Ulemas be understood across the dividing lines of local languages and ethnic groups, thereby expanding the auditory audience.

More interestingly, along with the Westernized elite, these bilingual specialists in religion are also those who not only have access to the Internet owing to their economic capital (namely, the capacity to afford prices for access to computers and the Internet) but also can read in both French and Arabic, owing to their cultural capital (Alzouma, 2013). Although Nigerien content with a religious character (particularly Nigerien Islamic websites) is still very scarce on the Internet, references to Islam pervade Nigerien online forums, Nigerien social media, and Nigerien mobile exchanges, as demonstrated by the numerous Qur'an verses that accompany posts, threads, and messages regardless of the subject of discussion. On Nigerien online forums where competing political views are discussed, proponents of Islamic positions are always present and strongly defend Islam against secular political parties. In addition, Islam-related topics are among the most discussed topics on forums such as Agadez-Niger.com, even when the heading of the thread is not directly related to Islam. For example, on this same forum, the thread "History, Religions, and Traditions" is mostly devoted to Islam in Niger, with thousands of related posts.

5.6. Recruiting New Converts and Spreading the Faith

Apart from those believers who know each other and maintain relationships through the use of mobile phones, many people who are not specifically members of a particular religious group are often joined, or even contacted or recruited, by channels that are made more effective by the use of this technical tool. It is not uncommon to hear one's phone signal a new message which, when opened, turns out to be a religious message such as "Fear Allah!, the Most High, the Most Glorious!" This is a form of religious proselytizing that follows devious paths but nevertheless often achieves its objective in a religious environment where everything incites devotion and where deviance or the singularity of those who do not go to the local mosque for daily prayers is quickly noticed, stigmatized, and even denounced as evidenced in the following anecdote counted by Ibrahim, a trader:

"Not long ago, a man of an advanced age died in my neighborhood. He was the head of a family with older children. But we never saw him at the mosque while he was known as being of a Muslim heritage, particularly because his wife is a devout Muslim woman who, we know, did the pilgrimage. So when his death was announced in the neighborhood, nobody went to offer condolences to the family. Nobody in the neighborhood accompanied him to the cemetery. Some people even say that no prayer was offered to him when people gathered around his tomb, but I am not sure of that. What I know is that people from our neighborhood did not attend his funeral. It was a great shame for his family, particularly for his wife and for

his children we knew well. Then, shortly after, they left the neighborhood, probably for fear of being stigmatized”.

Thus, when someone who is known to be of Muslim heritage is noticed for their non-participation in prayers and other religious ceremonies, among the means used by the community to try to bring them “in the right direction” are advice given in private, the waazis (sermons), and sometimes anonymous messages sent by mobile phone. One could, therefore, say that this technical tool is used to strengthen the faith of those who already are believers, to maintain groups of religious devotion, and to spread the religious message but also to convince hesitant newcomers or to recruit new members. Apart from religious messages, techniques of inclusion in the group, techniques of cooptation (consisting, for example, of giving their telephone number to other members who strive to include them among the group), and information sharing (about religious websites, places of prayer, sermons taking place during the week, religious programs on television or radio, places of religious meetings or ceremonies, or even for strictly social ceremonies concerning members of the group who need to show solidarity) are some of the most effective methods used by co-religionists to maintain ties among themselves.

However, although believers undoubtedly find mobile phones useful in their everyday religious life, the picture appears to be more complex when they are asked to talk about those aspects of mobile phones they think are negative. The answers then become equivocal, revealing ambivalent sentiments or even fear and rejection.

5.7. The Ambivalent Reception of Mobile Phones among Nigerien Muslims

As seen above, it appears that the mobile phone is changing the patterns of social mobilization for religious purposes in Niger. However, this does not amount to the mobile phone transforming religion or reshaping religious practices in Niger. More importantly, while use of the mobile phone is expanding among Nigerien religious communities, this expansion is also confronting resistance because of the ambivalent nature of technical objects which, for many Muslims, have positive effects but also negative effects. Indeed, there are two opposing views on modern technology in the Muslim world: on one side, a kind of technocentrism that magnifies the contribution of Islamic civilization to science and technology and, on the other, a kind of dystopia that emphasizes the role that Western technology, the bearer of opposite values, plays in the destruction of Islamic principles or the threat that it represents for proper Islamic behavior. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Technology... brings with it a certain technological culture which is against the soul of the human being as an immortal being, and is against the fabric of all traditional societies which are based on the spiritual relationship between the human being and the objects he or she creates, that are based on an art that is creative and reflects God's creativity, as the Supreme Artisan” (Nasr, 2005, p. 113-114). In light of this conception of technology, it is not difficult to understand that the reception of mobile phones among Nigerien Muslims is marked by mixed feelings, notably because of the disruptive character of mobile phone use in sacred spaces, during prayers and preachings, or because of the weakening of parental control on children, the weakening of patriarchal control on women, and numerous other effects seen as “negative” by the respondents.

5.8. The Transgressive Character of Mobile Phone Use in Sacred Spaces

Several studies have addressed the issue of mobile phone use in public spaces and the intolerance manifested by people toward mobile phone ringing and calls in public spaces (Ling, 2002; Lasen, 2004; Williams & Williams, 2005). However, only a few studies have addressed the ethical and religious issues raised by mobile phone ringing in sacred contexts.

However, in Islam, there are important implications of mobile phone ringing during prayers and in sacred spaces such as mosques.

To better understand those implications, it is important to recall the distinction Eliade (1959) made between the sacred space and the profane space. According to Eliade, religions split reality, including the space inhabited by humans, into two dimensions: the sacred and the profane. The sacred space is where people enter in communion with their god(s). The profane space is the space we experience in our everyday lives and where we are relatively free to act. In contrast to the profane space, the sacred space is characterized by the existence of a set of rules that guide our comportment. When one passes from the profane space into the sacred space, one enters another world. Thus, the sacred space is a threshold, a space that requires people to behave differently from how they would in the profane space. The existence of the sacred space manifests some kind of discontinuity in the way we behave and in the way we do things in that we must act in accordance with a fixed and mandatory set of speeches, gestures, and behaviors.

In Islam, the sacred space *par excellence* is the mosque where believers gather for daily prayers, devotion, sermons, and education. The mosque is also a place for seemingly more profane activities such as socializing and discussing religious or political issues. However, it is during prayers that the sacred character of the mosque is the most obvious. Among things that invalidate Muslim prayers are distractions of all sorts because worshippers are believed to enter in communion with Allah during prayer. Thus, the advent of the mobile phone is raising many issues with regard to prayer in mosques. Mobile phone ringing during prayers is the most commonly cited distraction by our respondents:

“Mobile phone ringing during prayers is very disturbing. Sometimes we even have to restart our prayer because somebody forgot to shut off their mobile phone that rang loudly while we were praying”. (M.A., butcher, 30 years old).

“When you suddenly hear mobile phone ring while praying, you get lost in your recitation of the Qur’an verses during prayers. Sometimes even the Imam who is leading the collective prayer gets lost. One gets the impression that Sheytane (Satan) voluntarily provokes this to disturb our prayer. It’s really a bad feeling “. (A.I., unemployed, 45 years old).

“What is even more disturbing is that some of those ringtones have nothing Muslim or are even songs, music, or speeches clearly prohibited by Islam. Some others are humoristic ringing that make people laugh. So when they start while people are praying, it makes everybody uncomfortable”. (M.O., tailor, 37 years old).

The disruptive character of the ringing of the mobile phone is one reason why everywhere in mosques in Niger people are urged to shut off their devices before starting prayer or even before entering the mosque. However, some people never comply or forget to comply and the result is that prayers are disturbed or interrupted. What the respondents see as detrimental and disturbing is that the mobile phone blurs the distinction or separation between the sacred space and the profane space. It re-establishes continuity between these two kinds of space by subverting the sacred character of the mosque. In normal contexts, the private (and sacred) space of people who are praying is always respected because other people see them, know that they are praying, and are aware that they should not be disturbed. However, with the mobile phone in a pocket, people remain always connected and therefore always reachable by those who don’t see them and who don’t know what they are actually doing at that moment. Thus, mobile phones make possible the intrusion of a far-distant co-

communicator. Therefore, whether praying in a mosque or alone, the mobile phone remains a potential source of annoyance for the faithful. Although answering the phone is prohibited while praying, the obvious implication of the ring is to interrupt the believer's communion with God.

5.9. Perceived Immoral Uses of the Mobile Phone

Many of the respondents also stated that mobile phones help reinforce what they perceive as "immoral behaviors" and promote, according to them, un-Islamic behaviors. In other words, the mobile phone is blurring the boundaries between what believers consider to be an ideal Islamic lifestyle and what is not. Since the temporal world is full of temptations where Muslims constantly strive to stay "pure" or to resist what may challenge proper Islamic behavior, some think that instruments such as mobile phones can represent real threats to the Islamic identity and the Islamic ethos. Thus, the expansion of mobile phones, for many, seems to come with what they perceive as degradation or loosening of morals. The lottery (gambling), online pornography, and the possibility for married women to converse with people who do not have parental ties to them in a country where many women are confined to their houses and can only be visited by close relatives are all considered signs of permissiveness that the use of mobile phones makes possible or even encourages. Much like the proliferation of video cassettes with sexual content, perceived inappropriate use of mobile phones is seen as full of the potential to shake the very foundations of Islamic society or dismantle its fabric:

"Not everything is bad about the mobile phone, but me my concern with the mobile phone is particularly related to how young people use it. You never know how your own children are using their mobile phones. Controlling them becomes difficult". (S.A., trader, 52 years old).

"I have been told that some young people send pornographic photographs or download pornographic materials. This can create a great damage to our society". (I.M, trader, 48 years old).

"I know a woman who was repudiated by her husband because she was surprised talking to a man with her mobile phone. These are the kinds of things that are happening today with the mobile phone". (Y. S., trader, 51 years old).

Children, but also women, in particular, "are the privileged targets of moralizing Islamic discourses" (Masquelier, 2001, p. xviii) in Niger. This is probably the outcome of the political and economic liberalization that took place in the early 1990s and which resulted in the advent of women in the public sphere through the creation of many women's organizations. The manifestation of an assertive female presence in the public sphere, along with the growing appropriation of new technologies by female actors, of course raised concerns in some circles of this patriarchal society. New information technologies have offered new spaces for the expression of female agency, female identity, and female social and political participation, but this also is threatening the perceived permanency and stability of social structures and social relations between groups (e.g., between women and men).

5.10. Mobile Phone, Criminal Activities, and Terrorism

One of the widespread concerns raised by the respondents when it comes to mobile phone use in Niger is the possibility of using it anonymously. According to one of our informants, the mobile phone "encourages lies", by which he means duplicity, masquerading, and impunity.

Another interviewee highlighted the fact that the mobile phone “makes possible the rapid spread of bad information such as rumors, lies, sharing of bad images, or even blasphemies”, which are all prohibited in Islam. Misdeeds and malevolent behaviors by anonymous callers such as instances of harassment or insult are frequently cited as examples of the bad effects of mobile phone use. These recently led to calls (appeals) for a stricter regulation of mobile phone use; notably, calls for the official identification and registration of users because in Niger the vast majority of users use prepaid cards. As most people are poor, they cannot afford the monthly subscriptions that are standard in developed countries. Instead, everywhere on the streets of cities sellers of very cheap prepaid calling cards, SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards, and phones of all sizes and brands (most often second-hand handsets) abound. The identity of users only became a concern for political authorities with the recent increase in terrorist activities in the Sahel region. As is well known, mobile phones are being used for various terrorist activities, including the remote detonation of bombs, money laundering, coordination of criminal activities, and identity theft schemes. Currently, not only is Niger confronted with the threat of Boko Haram operating in neighboring Nigeria and using Niger as a rear base, a safe haven where its members can find refuge and reorganize (Faleye, 2013), but it also must deal with the activities of Al-Qaida in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operating in the neighboring countries of Algeria and Mali (Faleye, 2013). Terrorist attacks resulting in the death of dozens of military in the northern region of Agadez and the capital city of Niamey have also hit Niger in recent months and convinced political authorities that the time has come to take preventive actions, including the identification of mobile phone users. In November 2012, the Nigerien government therefore made it obligatory for mobile phone users to officially register, with a deadline of one year, and, as indicated above, this became effective as evidenced by the release of the official numbers of registered and un-registered users.

6. CONCLUSION

This article analyzed how mobile phones are influencing everyday practices of religion and religious behaviors in Niger, the challenges posed by the introduction of mobile phones in Niger, and how the believers and political and moral authorities are coping with these challenges or seeking to resolve related issues. Thus, the article first showed that mobile phones are playing an important role in the spread of religion, the creation of new religious communities, and the maintenance and strengthening of religious bonds. This can be seen in the use of multiple Islamic applications and interfaces purposefully designed to support everyday religious behaviors, in greetings and other forms of interpersonal civility and sociability, in changes that affected mobile phone ringtones, in sharing religious songs, sermons, preachings, and Qur’an verses, and in recruiting new converts. In all these everyday religious activities and behaviors, the mobile phone is playing the role of a material support for framing and maintaining an Islamic identity as well as guiding and controlling Muslims’ daily lives in the context of globalization and challenges posed by concurrent worldviews and lifestyles. At the same time, the mobile phone is also helping to maintain links between Nigerien Muslims and transnational Islamic networks. However, the reception of mobile phones in Niger appears to be ambivalent. While the mobile phone is hailed for its role in mobilizing believers for religious purposes, it also confronts resistance, notably because of the perceived threat it poses to Islamic ethics and Islamic morality. This can be seen in the perceived transgressive character of mobile phone use in sacred contexts and sacred spaces, particularly mobile phone ringing during prayers and other rituals that require undisturbed contemplation, the permissiveness the mobile phone is believed to promote among children, young people, and women, and even its potential use in criminal or terrorist activities.

The contribution of this paper to the field of mobile religion is two-fold. On the one hand it is the first paper to give a detailed description of everyday use of how mobile phone for religious mobilization in Niger Republic. Previous studies have mainly focused on radio, television, DVDs, CDs, and cassettes, while mobile phones are currently the most used device for communication purpose in Niger. On the other hand, theoretically, the takes a cautious approach regarding the “transformative” or “reshaping” character of technology notably the technocentrist view, that overemphasizes the power of technology to transform social relations. While recognizing the new possibilities offered by mobile phones, the paper also shows the limits and the challenging properties of this device. In other words, it would be a mistake to believe that the mobile phone is reshaping religious practices in Niger. While the mobile phone is helping to expand religious activities, it is not guiding them.

7. REFERENCES

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