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Editorial

## Niger: Emerging literature and modern orature – voicing identity

In many ways, this special issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* is all about identity, seen dynamically in terms of literary artefacts and intellectual and cultural constructs. It involves change, exchange, mutations. This does not concern only Nigérien national identity in the making, but also the new foundation of emerging South African identity.

The change of orientation of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, the literary review at the origin of this special issue, seems significant and symptomatic in this regard. Created in 1951, the review was originally limited to publications on Afrikaans literature. In recent years, following a new editorial mandate, it welcomes a much wider variety of scholarly articles on the literature of Africa and the African Diaspora. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* currently publishes in French, Dutch and English and not only in Afrikaans, as it did in the past. However, in order to reach as wide a public as possible, this special issue will be published bilingually, on paper and electronically, in English and French respectively.

Seen from Niger and from the Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey, academic and cultural identity has a lot to do with the elaboration of this volume. The majority of the contributing authors, specialists of literature for the most part, collaborate in interdisciplinary research on Nigérien literature and cultures as members of the research group on “Literature, Gender and Development. Nigérien Visions and Perspectives”. But contributors also include a civil engineer, a specialist of sports and a philosopher. Most, but not all, are Nigérien, they all share a common love of Niger, a common passion for local cultures, and a common commitment to the development and diffusion of its cultural wealth. In fact, the idea put forward decades ago by the first Pan Africanist militants that culture, its study and diffusion, at home and abroad, is a factor and an indicator of a country’s development, underpins the work of all the authors in this issue. Their scholarly endeavours evolve in the context of a country facing formidable developmental challenges on all fronts, simultaneously, with reduced finan-

cial means over the last fifteen years, due, in particular, to the decline in demand for uranate, the salt of uranic acid, formerly the major source of income.

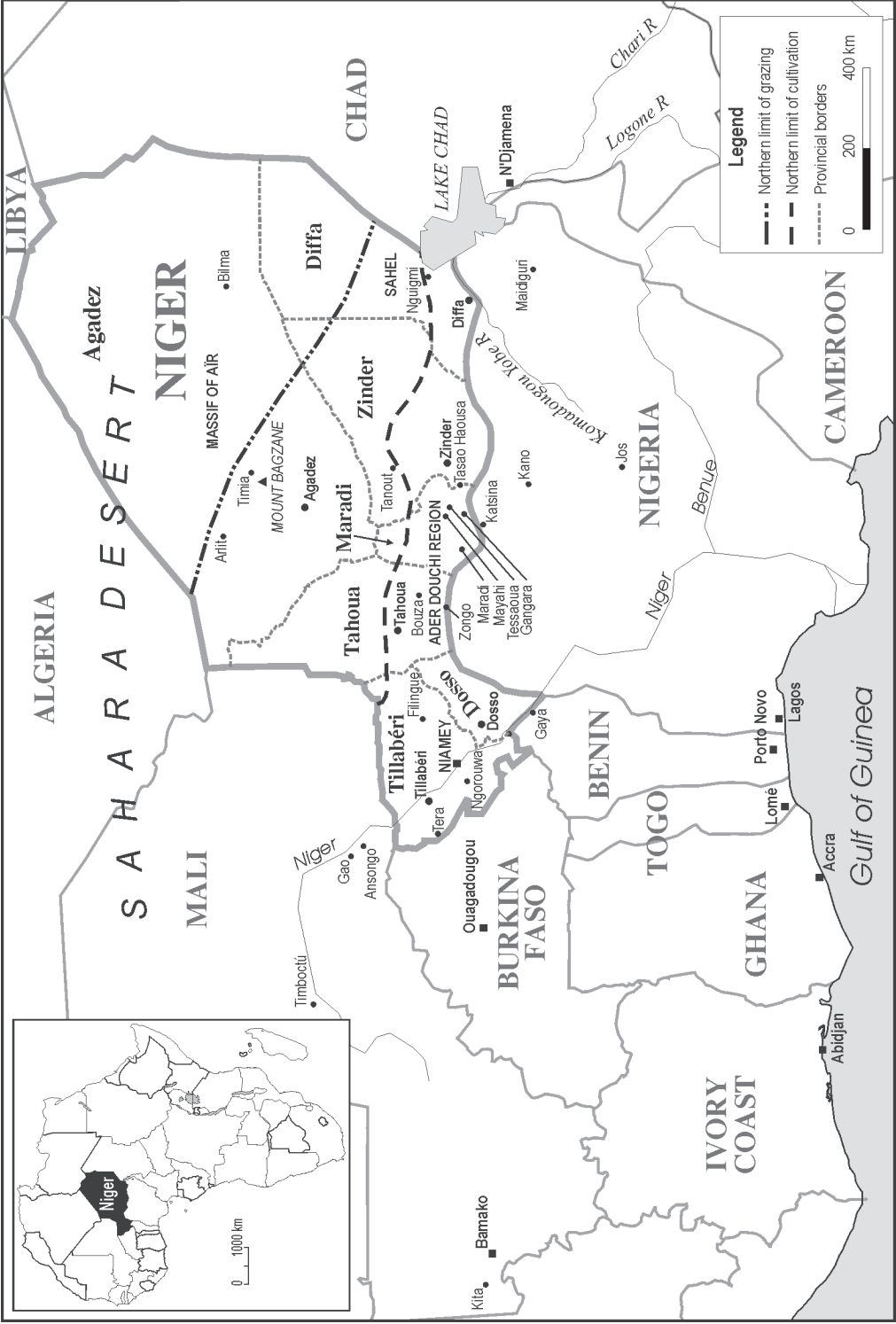
### **About Niger: Geography, history, populations**

Facing the vast expanses of Niger's almost lunar landscape, culture is the last thing that comes to mind, neither culture nor agriculture for that matter. Travelling over hundreds or even thousands of kilometres, on the black ribbon of the motorways that link Niamey, the capital, to the rural cities of the interior and these cities to one another, one is likely to experience a disturbing impression of emptiness: an absence of people, monuments, traces of civilization of the past and of today's modern state.

Who would think that we are here, in the Sahel, former route of the once-flourishing trans-Saharan caravan trains, made possible by the politics and administration of yesterday's sultanates that ensured the security of traders and their property over an extended zone? It hardly comes to mind, while passing through the flat expanses that seem to unfurl endlessly that this was once a large cultural zone, the arena of myriad interminglings, and that its current peoples and customs derive from "the grand empires of West Africa": the Songhay empire, the Fulani empire of Sokoto, the Kanem-Bornou empire. In fact, the caravan trails linked "the Gao empire to the regions of Fez and Egypt, the Hausa states to the oases of Algeria and to the region of Tripoli", while traversing the Nigérien cities of Agadez and Zinder, which were prosperous urban centres before the colonial era (Motcho et al, 2005).

It is not surprising if Niger appears to be flat and empty to the uninformed traveller confined to the cab of a vehicle on the road, far from the beaten track. Niger, the largest country in West Africa, has a population of 10 790 352 inhabitants, scattered unevenly over an area of 1 267 000 km<sup>2</sup>, that is a population density of 10 inhabitants per square kilometre. Most of this area is arid land, with 75% in the Sahara and 25% in the hot, dry climate of the semi-arid Sahel. The landscape comprises low laying plateaus, under 200m, in general, except in the north, where the arid mountains of the Air region has several summits of over 1000 metres, culminating in Mount Bagzane which peaks at 2022 metres.

The River Niger which crosses 550 kilometres of Niger's territory waters the western part of the country and is its only permanent river. In the south-east, the Komadougou Yobé and Lake Chad provide water



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for neighbouring populations. But the latter almost disappeared on the Nigérien side of the border with Chad as a result of several successive years of deficient rainfall.

Water is indeed a precious and rare commodity in Niger. Elevated temperatures account for a rapid evaporation of surface water, while rain falls only four to five months a year in the Sahelian and Sudanese zones, and almost never elsewhere. Rainfall levels vary between 350 and 800 millimetres a year, yet agriculture (millet, sorghum, peas, cotton...) is almost entirely rain dependent. But rains are irregular and agricultural methods rudimentary, hence the permanent risk of famine for an overwhelmingly rural population, whose survival is linked to subsistence agriculture. However, the risk of famine is less acute in "the north Sudanese climate of the Dendi region, in the extreme south of the country" which extends over 5000 km<sup>2</sup>, and where rain falls more than five months a year. All over the country, the landscape bears the stigmata of erosion, wrought by man and the elements (Motcho et al, 2005).

If one asks Nigérien children in a primary schoolroom to indicate the geographical situation of their country, they will reply, in French, almost surely in a sing-song mode: "Niger borders on: Libya and Algeria to the north, Benin and Nigeria to the south, Mali and Burkina Faso to the west and Chad, to the east". The sands of the desert, flat or amassed into dunes, curled by the wind, ripple like waves; but there is no sea here, for the country is landlocked.

If a Nigérien, travelling abroad, asked "where do you come from?", answers: "From Niger", he is very likely to be subtly corrected: "Ah, from Nigeria!" Indeed, the telephone directories of the world usually ignore Niger and its country code, 227, and pass on the next known country starting with N, Niger's extremely populous and considerably wealthier neighbour and partner. This error and ignorance has to be endured even in France, whose natives, moreover, forget to pronounce the final "r". At any rate, our traveller must still stand corrected, if only in the matter of pronunciation: "Ah, from Nigé!" For how can anyone be Nigérien? How do you pronounce the nationality to avoid the eternal confusion? Where does this name come from? How and why did this vast, problematic and strangely enchanting country come into existence?

Niger exists in its current territorial form since 1947. This former colony of France owes its existence to the strategic concerns of the former *metropole* (Idrissa, 2001). In 1885, the Berlin conference established the limits between French and British African territories, but this delimita-

tion did not become automatically effective. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, France sent exploratory missions, then armed columns of pacification including the infamous and blood-thirsty Voulet-Chanoine column, whose exploits have been deliberately silenced in the annals of the colonial history of French West Africa (Mathieu, 1975). On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1922, Niger was “promoted” from the status of a military territory to that of a colony; in 1958, as a recompense for its numerous soldiers who “died for France” during World War II, like those of the rest of France’s African colonies, the colony of Niger was further “promoted” to the status of member of the French Community of Africa and elected representatives to the French Parliament and republican institutions. On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1960, Niger became independent, after having voted “no” to a projected confederation of former French West African colonies, in the 1958 referendum. Diori Hamani and his one-party government, under the Progressive African Party for Democracy and African Unity (PPN/RDA) ruled for 15 years; followed by another 15 years of a military regime after the 1974 *coup d’état* led by the Colonel Seyni Kountché, until his death in 1987. Ali Saïbou, a military officer took over and allowed the country to move towards democratisation, the first step being the legalisation of a multiparty system in 1990. The trend of the National Conference did not exclude Niger which held its own lengthy sessions of washing of dirty linen in public. In 1996, a military coup ousted Mahamane Ousmane, democratically elected 3 years earlier.

In general, democracy is making headway in the country and in the heart of its people, but its path is strewn with obstacles as the 1999 *coup d’état*, that cost the life of President Baré Maïnassara, bears out. In 1999 and in 2004 Mamadou Tandja, a reconverted army officer, won the suffrage of his compatriots. The government arising from the last election includes five female ministers, thus recovering the 1995 rates (Charlick et al, 1996).

Gigantic development challenges still loom, underlined by some depressing statistics: Niger is one of the six least advanced nations; 60% of its population earn less than one US dollar a day; 63% live under the poverty line; the country has been experiencing negative growth for over 15 years, the fertility rate is the highest in the world, the same goes for the rate of maternal and infantile morbidity and mortality; more than 80% of the population is illiterate; 41% do not have access to drinking water; and so on and so forth, endlessly... These statistics are in no way to be ignored or minimized.<sup>1</sup> They underline the heavy responsibilities that Niger’s government and people must face. Indeed, to be

effective, democracy depends on the eradication of all the factors that prevent people from enjoying basic human rights and equal rights as citizens of their country: poverty, illiteracy, discrimination based on gender, social or ethnic origin, political exclusion and social stigmatisation of whatever type (Tidjani Alou, 2000; 2001).

However, the modern democratic state in Niger coincides and co-habits with various social hierarchies and vestiges of the past (Tidjani Alou, 2001: 174). These include the rights and position of elders, discrimination against women and against certain groups of Nigériens. The latter comprises what Mahaman Tidjani Alou (2001: 77) refers to as “the persistence of slavery in a democratic context”. It enjoys greater attention in the national and international media than the rights of women and the problems involved in the passing of a new “Family code” (*Code de la famille*), which is hardly less important, to say the least. Negotiation for the latter continues discreetly, with a renewed rhetorical tact. Overall, various forms of change due to globalisation of different types, from the advent of Islam to that of the colonial and post colonial state, have seen progressive degradations in the rights of women on both private and public fronts (Mounkaïla, 2001).

In the meanwhile, the question of “slavery in Niger” becomes increasingly topical. It is something that have been written about in newspapers and in academic studies by Nigériens, discussed in seminars and non-governmental congresses, thus breaking the “conspiracy of silence” (Botte, 2001; Abdelkader, 2004) surrounding this delicate and complex issue. Roger Botte (2001: 20) pinpoints the erroneous tendency to define the widespread and prejudicial vestiges of slavery in contemporary African societies in terms applicable to ancient Europe, American and West Indian plantation society and colonial Africa and their respective systems of production. He underlines in the case of contemporary Africa diverse and complex vestigial forms of slavery presented as evolutions due to internal pre-colonial transformations, colonial and post-colonial developments (Botte, 2001: 22-23). Nonetheless, Abdelkader (2004) notes that though practices are diverse and forms vary – between “passive slavery” characterised mainly by social stigmatisation and “active slavery” practiced in nomadic groups among Niger’s Arabic, Touareg and Fulani populations – there remains a constant principle: the slave does not enjoys the rights of a citizen (*l’esclave n’a aucun droit de participer à la vie citoyenne*). He insists on the fact that the various evolutions since pre-colonial times do not preclude the fact that these remnants of slavery deprive “hundreds of men, women and

children" of their rights; that they face daily deprivation of liberty and constant physical brutality and humiliation (Abdelkader, 2004: 18). Besides, the traditional chieftaincy, Islam, the colonial state and the post-colonial state alike consistently choose to cloak the issue in voluminous swathes of silence (Abdelkader, 2004: 53-79). Various laws and conventions (colonial, post colonial, international) were passed or signed, but had little or no impact. Slavery was penalized in Niger only recently, by a law introduced in May 2003.

Statistics and facts must be faced and positive action taken. Nevertheless, we cannot but emphasize the fact that exclusive focus on figures and facts of this kind, however important, if unmitigated by other, more positive viewpoints, obscures the cultural wealth, diversity and originality of Niger's populations, which already labour under the weight of lack of international recognition, beyond the sub-region. This special issue is entirely dedicated to the cause of promoting this deserved recognition. However, before, introducing its contents, it is only fitting that we look, albeit rapid and superficial, at the people who are Niger's principal wealth and the indispensable lever of its development.

Human presence is attested to in the north of the current Nigérien territory since the palaeolithic age (Hamani quoted by Motcho et al, 2005). This is a land of ancient migrations, occupied by 8 ethnic groups that spill over the borders of neighbouring countries, traced by arbitrary colonial hands: Hausas (54%, the majority of whom live in Nigeria); Songhay-Zarmas (19%, who have "family" in neighbouring Benin, Mali and Burkina Faso); Fulanis (8.5%, found all over the region); Touaregs (10%, also dwell in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya and Mali); Kanouris (4.6%, who also people Nigeria and Chad); Arabs (0.3%, also found in Algeria, Chad and Libya) and some Boudoumas around Lake Chad. In fact, the language they speak is the main distinguishing factor between these groups, which are really the product of diverse types of intermixing. Though French is the official language, the language of education and administration, of science and technology, only 10% of Nigériens speak it fluently. 98% are Muslims and the vast majority practice a tolerant form of Islam, often tinted with vestiges of ancestral religious practices, in which the earth and water, the fertility of the flora and fauna, the balance between the world of human beings and that of the spirits are central. Freedom of religion is a legally recognised and effective right. The population is young (50% are under the age of 15) and rural (80%).

### **Voicing identity through literature**

Nigérien identity, including relation to the “other”, is a white thread running through all that has been mentioned above. But what about the cultural and literary aspects of this collective identity that is slowly but surely in the process of construction, based on various endogenous and exogenous, juxtaposed or hybridised contributions? (Bayart, 1996: 54-57) It may be noted that, without being rigid, certain cultural elements seem to have the genius of changing while remaining, if not “the same” at least close enough to archetypes to be recognized (Fosto-Djemo, 1983: 17).

As seen in the perspective of this collective overview, cultural (and literary) identity is not merely an individual affair. It cannot be summed up in “stable data”, it is not something that is acquired once and for all, and has nothing to do with “pure” expressions seen as a synonym of “authenticity”, if this term must reek, as it often does, of cultural particularisms and exclusions bordering on a “racism in reverse” (Bayart, 1996: 10). Forgetting history, the action of interwoven histories, is merely the most venial sin of those who support this position. As explored by the articles presented herein, identity is something people build, that they “negotiate” (Eriksson Baaz et al, 2001: 5) through the academic, cultural and literary stands they take (to limit the subject to our area of competence) through the artistic spoken word, through the literary text or via criticism.

Of course, these negotiations and constructions operate at the intimate level, that of the individual facing personal ideals and constraints, but they are also produced in confrontation with the other, with society on the move, with foreign and new realities. Like the question of the other, the question of power and of the past are never divorced from these diverse relational dynamics. At any rate, the last two are omnipresent (see Stuart Hall quoted in Eriksson Baaz et al, 2001: 5). However, the past, as explored by the different contributions to this issue, is not a lost object to be found and fixed like new. It offers indispensable milestones that help people to get their bearings in the present, to remember and measure the road travelled, to evaluate their human adventure in terms of achievements, loss and change.

### **Orature and emerging literature in Niger**

Oral forms remain vigorous and dynamic in Niger, a country undergoing rapid change. Their relation to written texts, whether literary or literary intention, are varied and complex. Oral art also ends up as texts



when transcribed and translated into French or English. Moreover, orature continues to exist as a contemporary literary mode and as contemporary literary genres, whether these end up on paper or not. These new creations belong to what we may call *modern or contemporary orature* since the texts in question often point to unprecedented or evolving moral social and aesthetic values in the process of rapid transformation, expressing the universe in which Nigériens of today live, think and dream.

As far as written texts are concerned, they are very clearly a part of what has been called the “field of emerging literature” (*le champ de la littérature émergente*, see Fonkoua et al, 2001) This term designates “developing” literatures, and corresponds to certain characteristic including these:

- They are recent literatures, usually dating back no further than the discovery of the “Americas”, and usually much, much later, products of European imperial territorial expansion, of colonization and post colonization. Thus an emerging literature has both geographic and historical borders, usually corresponding to the Third World, the South (but not always, see Quebec, Belgium);
- Geographically and historically situated, emerging literatures are invariably inscribed in the field of cultural powers where, notwithstanding generous or optimistic interpretations, they hardly occupy choice of place, for various reasons: (a) they are recent, (b) they have yet to attain the “critical mass” conferred by a production supported and valorized, conserved and transmitted over several centuries; (c) they are the products of economically and culturally dominated countries;
- They often integrate hybrid cultural contexts, with contributions at times situated at opposite poles, endogenous and exogenous, respectively.

Therefore, these literatures emerge, but it is not certain that they do so in an entirely spontaneous manner. For, the colonial state and the colonial educational system (of which the William Ponty Teacher Training College of the former French West Africa in Dakar, Senegal was an example) the post-colonial state, France – privileged partner – but also non-francophone partners like Germany are often voluntary actors who give an intentional push towards the creation of a national literature. This happens through the encouragement by the colonial school sy-

stem of illustrations of indigenous cultures, of mastery of French and of budding literary genius; the national Book Month organized sporadically by the Ministry of Culture of the independent state, and its attendant literary competitions and prizes. The German cooperation project promotes the edition of literary works in local languages. Consequently, national literary production is also “petitioned for” (*suscitée*) in part.

This rapid inventory suggests both complexity and wealth. Indeed, if emerging literatures are not impressive in terms of the volume of production and though they might not command respect based on the “rights of primogeniture” and all that this entails, they can however stake a claim to local and international significance. They bear witness, in particular, to original syntheses and to the existence of *other* cultures. They inscribe fresh realities, difficulties, conflicts, challenges and achievements on the record of international cultural heritage, while proposing new internal and international dialogues. To that extent, they follow the common destiny of literature (and art) in general.

### **About the contributions to this special issue**

The articles presented here reflect in part the oral-written divide, but more often than not, they emphasize the interaction between both modes of literary expression. There is the obvious – and reciprocal – influence of orature on the written texts of Niger’s emerging literature, or the fact that the endeavours of researchers often serve to transform oral verbal arts into “texts” through transcription and translation. The contributions presented here are of various types and orientations:

- Testimonies by two friends of Niger concerning their encounters, exchanges and friendship with two Nigérien writers – Mariako Kéléti and Abdoulaye Mamani – (Boyd and Pénel);
- A cultivated, point of view “from the inside” on the passage from a local religious ritual involving sacrifice to water spirits, the *gorou gondi*, to literary, cinematographic and theatrical creation (Seyni);
- Socio-cultural analysis of the relation between sports (Nigérien traditional wrestling), oral art and the symbolic attributes of the power of the traditional chief, as illustrated in this “total spectacle” (*spectacle total*): sporting and cultural, immensely popular and of great significance in terms of identity (Sériba);
- Intertextual analysis of symbols and representations of power, as exemplified by the traditional chief and the “Dodo” or ogre (to

which the chief is, moreover, associated) in popular Hausa literature, appreciated as a relation between oral genres (song and folktale), also characterized as by borrowings and innovation (Oumarou);

- Reflections on the islamisation of Hausa poetry explored as a manifestation of the verbal art of the African *griot* which, extending beyond individual originality or genius, calls upon the collaboration of musicians, a chorus of answerers, singing, comedy and dramatization; all ingredients of praise songs for the Sultans of Damagaram, of anti-praise songs for those who ignore Allah and the love of a job well done (Niang);
- Exploration of the theme of love in Nigérien courtly epic, as sung by the famous *griot* Djado Sekou, with its fortunes and misfortunes, demands and excesses, heroism and ultimate power of destruction: variations on love seen as ethos, *eros* and *thanatos* (Tandina);
- Efforts towards a typology and reflection on a few major themes of the Nigérien novel and on its anchorage in the local geographic, climatic, political and social environment and in the effects they induce: drought, emigration to the city or abroad and the often painful encounter with the local or regional “other” (Issa Daouda; Kindo Patengouh);
- Discussion of the strategies Nigérien writers like Mamadou Haliou Sabbo deploy in order to reconcile writing in the “language of the other” with mental identification and effective complicity with the local reader, through the inclusion of a shared cultural code, visible in literary onomastics and the use of proverbs, in particular (Labo Bouché & Tidjani Alou).

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Le texte original en français est disponible sur [www.letterkunde.up.ac.za](http://www.letterkunde.up.ac.za)

#### Note

1. For statistics on Niger, see, for example, [www.usaid.gov/pubs/cp97/countries/ne.htm](http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/cp97/countries/ne.htm); [www.afrol.com/articles/13453](http://www.afrol.com/articles/13453); various reports in [www.ipsnews.net/africa/interna](http://www.ipsnews.net/africa/interna) and Strategic Media International’s DVD production *Le Niger*.

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