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## Heirs of the Sheikh *Izala* and its Appropriation of Usman Dan Fodio in Niger

*Les héritiers du cheikh Izala et ses appropriations d'Usman Dan Fodio au Niger*

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## Heirs of the Sheikh *Izala* and its Appropriation of Usman Dan Fodio in Niger

Concluding an article on the re-Islamization ideology that was instrumental in the emergence of the Sokoto Caliphate (1809-1903) in 19<sup>th</sup> century West Africa, Abdul Rahman Doi (1987: 227) claims: "The caliphate and its history will never be forgotten by the Nigerian Muslims nor should it be by sincere worshippers of Allah anywhere, because it may provide a useful and inspiring model for *Tajdid* [religious renewal] in other cultures of the world." Political history and Muslim discourses in contemporary Niger prove Doi right. Religious reform ideologies articulate re-Islamization discourses, but they have also consistently referred to Usman Dan Fodio (1754-1817), the central figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sokoto *Jihad*. Within many circles, Usman Dan Fodio has become a "*lieu de mémoire*" (Nora 1996)<sup>1</sup> and a "passé composé" (Triaud 1999) while Muslim activists revisit his achievement, bringing it to memory in order to reshape contemporary institutions and frame socioreligious agendas.

So far, the academic accounts of Islamic reform discourses in Niger have concentrated on the *Izala* movement, a trend that gained prominence in the 1970s in Nigeria and expanded to Niger in the mid-1980s. In Niger, by 2000, *Izala* has become the main voice of Islamic reform. Most of the studies end up focusing only on the *Izala* anti-Sufi discourse, stressing its differences and divergences with Sufi Islam. When these representations point to the wahabi-salafi tendency of the movement, not only *Izala* appears as the Sufi foe, but it is also viewed as an imported brand of Islamic discourse foreign to the local imaginary.

In stressing this foreignness of *Izala*, the accounts have told only part of the story of this Islamic trend, precisely because "local" Sufi models, in particular Usman Dan Fodio, have inspired the movement. References to Sheikh Usman Dan Fodio's 19<sup>th</sup> century *jihad* pervade the *Izala* discourse despite the fact that he was affiliated with the *Qadiriyya* Sufi order whose

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1. I borrow this concept from NORA (1996: XVII) who states: "A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community".

practices *Izala* criticizes. Dan Fodio's acts, deeds and ideas are consistently read as *Izala* "moments" which should inspire Muslims' religious and political agendas. These references and ways of imagining *Shehu*—as some call him—have contributed to shape the *Izala* reform discourse in Niger. Empirical evidence of this inspiration lays in the way the leaders of *Izala* have read Dan Fodio's contribution to the development of Islam in West Africa. Their religious imagination has recast him as the "true" Sunni, the Sheikh of the *Sunna* and the *Jama'a* (local community). This suggests that in their references to the "pious", the "virtuous" and the "true sunni" the *Izala* agents have sought inspiration in a Sufi leader.

Theoretically, what is at stake here is not so much how *Izala* operates, but how the accounts of this movement have relied on a dichotomy Sufi/Anti-Sufi that rigidifies our analytical categories and therefore handicaps our conceptual apparatus. Blurring the line of demarcation between *Wahhabi*, known as anti-Sufi, and Sufi figures, the appropriation of Dan Fodio in contemporary Niger calls for a rethinking of the categories Islamic studies have so far used to make sense of the *Izala* discourses. In this article, I intend to highlight this appropriation and how a perspective based on the categories sufi and anti-sufi fails to capture the complexity of the *Izala* movement and its theological genealogy.

In other words, this article is an attempt to look at how Usman Dan Fodio speaks to a context where not only is he remembered as a great Muslim leader, but his work in the transformation of the political and moral economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hausaland and West Africa is also perceived as a source of values that should inspire social as well as political actions today.

As Davis and Starn (1989: 2) propose, "whenever memory is invoked we should be asking ourselves: by whom, where, in which context, against what?" The relationship Muslims establish here is one to a tradition, *i.e.* a set of discourses that have gained authority and which contribute to the normative framework of a community and its practices. From this perspective, how Usman Dan Fodio's *jihad* came to represent an inspiring source for Muslims in Niger's public sphere is an interesting fact for the historian of religious ideas.

In looking at the appropriation of this *jihad* by Muslim discourses in Niger, I intend to show how a local formation is serving a re-Islamization enterprise in a context where much of the attention is given to globalizing and globalized originations. However, from the outset, I have to say that my aim is not to discuss the ultimate origin(s) of *Izala* in Niger, but, rather, to recognize another player in the references and the traditions of thinking that inspire present day Muslims' imagination.

The leaders of the two organizations (*Kitab wa Sunna* and *Ihyau Sunna*) I present here put to work the symbolic value of Usman Dan Fodio for their respective agendas. Their views illustrate how collective memory supports socioreligious transformation. They confirm that in many instances, people

remember according to their needs, their current situations and their socio-political conditions (Hirsh & Stewart 2005). How Muslims in Niger claim their Islamic identity is deeply grounded in a construction of the past that stresses the continuity between Usman Dan Fodio's *Jihad* and the contemporary Islamic activism aiming at reforming Muslim practices.

This contribution is essentially based on conversations I had with two leaders of the *Izala* organizations in Niger. Each has contributed to define the line of conduct within his organization. I present their orientations and the ways in which the leadership of each organization views the contribution of Usman Dan Fodio has made, in the remaking of Muslim politics in the region, but also in reshaping social and religious practices. The theocracy Usman Dan Fodio established in the region inspired many Muslim leaders. But, how his example affects Islam's presence in the public arena is worth investigating, as I note.

My first interview with either organization occurred in 2004, nearly 3 years after they had been authorized. I first met with Umar Isa, the leader of *Kitab wa Sunna* in the *Markaz* [multipurpose center], the headquarters of the organization in Niamey. I present these conversations in the first two sections and draw some theoretical considerations in the third.

### A Note on the Two Organizations

*Kitab wa Sunna* is one of the main *Izala* organizations in Niger. A group of young Muslim actors created this organization in 2001 after *Adini Islam* (Association pour la diffusion de l'islam au Niger), the first *Izala* organization in the country, was banned in 2000 following its involvement in violent demonstrations opposing an international fashion show (Sounaye 2005). Even before the ban of *Adini Islam*, theological divergences, leadership and management issues were already polarizing the organization, fuelling infighting and gradual fragmentation along generational lines. Consequently, the ban came as the opportunity for the younger generation to break away and form its own organization. It took the name *Kitab wa Sunna alal Fahmi Saleh* indicating a theological orientation that sees in the Qur'an (*Kitab*) and the prophetic tradition as understood and put to work by the pious ancestors (*Sunna alal Fahmi Saleh*), the only authentic sources of proper Islamic practice. The remaining of the initial *Adini Islam* took the name *Ihyau Sunna* (revivification of the *Sunna*) and maintained in his position Sheikh Yahaya who has been leading *Adini Islam* until it was banned. Both organizations were authorized by the Ministry of Interior in 2001 and remained famous for their focus on Islamic learning and their preaching activities in the urban areas but also in the countryside.

Despite their split, one common feature these groups share is their appropriation of Usman Dan Fodio, in particular how they attempt to follow in his footsteps. The fragmentation that occurred may be interesting for a

sociological analysis of the religious sphere, but for the present discussion, it will suffice to note the convergence of the views and practices of these two organizations. Both have expressed views on the *Usmaniyya*<sup>2</sup> era and the *Jihad* that resulted in the formation of the Sokoto Caliphate (Hiskett 1994; Last 1967). Their pronouncements show the relevance of Usman Dan Fodio in the contemporary context, they demand also that we investigate this phenomenon. As many authors have already showed, Usman Dan Fodio is probably the Islamic leader who has marked the most both Hausa religious history and imaginary. The next section is an illustration of how Usman Dan Fodio exerts a fascination over the leader of *Kitab wa Sunna* and his organization.

### *Kitab wa Sunna*: Usman Dan Fodio, the Model of the Good Leader

An engaged activist in his early 40s, Umar Isa has had an exceptional intellectual trajectory. He is part of a new literate elite whose primary language is Arabic rather than French, as it is the case with most of the educated elite in Niger. Umar Isa and the elite group to which he belongs are usually trained outside of the formal Nigerien secular educational system. He sought higher Islamic learning in various institutions including the Islamiyya School system of Northern Nigeria, the Islamic University of Say in Niger, the Islamic University of Madina and Sudan. This trajectory is not uncommon among contemporary Muslim leaders, especially those who are now in their 40s. After 1991, many Islamic associations were able to secure grants and scholarships from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Sudan. This was an opportunity for a significant number of their members to pursue higher Islamic learning in these countries. Umar Isa was granted a scholarship to pursue a graduate degree, first at the local Islamic University in Say, Niger, and then at the Islamic University of Medina (Saudi Arabia) where he specialized in theology. After the split of *Adini Islam*, he emerged as the natural leader of *Kitab wa Sunna*. He was then entrusted with the task of building a vibrant Islamic organization strictly in line with the teachings of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*. Since then, he completed his term and has decided to take a job at the Amir Sultan Center, a new facility the Saudi government has built in Niamey to promote Islamic learning. His managerial responsibilities left him little time to devote to the organization, but he still has a public role as he hosts a weekly TV program that focuses on the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his successors.

The status of Islam within Nigerien politics is a matter of major preoccupation for the *Izala* as a socioreligious organization. *Izala* has often complained about what it sees as a marginalization of Nigeriens' Islamic

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2. Usman Dan Fodiyo's vision and implementation of a Islamic society in West Africa, mainly in the Hausaland and the neighborhood.

identity in state affairs (Sounaye 2009a). In fact, the Islamization of politics in Niger is at the core of the political ideology of this movement. I started our conversation by introducing the ongoing debate about the relationship between Islam and politics in contemporary Niger. His answer was straightforward: “What Muslims are asking is that the State let them practice their religion 100%. Muslims should not be subjected to State’s unreligious rule. The State’s will to power and control should not stand between Muslims and their religious practices.” As he will argue later, in a nationalist tone, “people in Niger have all they need to build and manage a peaceful and prosperous state. Other Muslim leaders have shown the way. We just need to follow their example. As an organization, that is what we are doing”<sup>3</sup>.

However, Umar Isa acknowledges also that a true Islamic dominion does not come free of charge. He refers to several cases in Muslims’ political history when Muslims had to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to establish and live by the norms of their religion. Authentic Islamic rule is achieved through challenging moments, especially because, as he argues, the elite in power has rather foreign cultural and political references (*Dokokin Nasaru*). This is a critique I heard several times among the followers of the two organizations I present in this article. In *Izala*’s view, the political order in place failed to liberate Muslims because it remains structurally European (*Milkin Nasaru*). The concept of *Milkin Nasaru* (lit: the rule of the White men) refers historically to the colonial rule. But it has been used in the *Izala* context to connote both cultural and political alienations. As he recalls the famous formula of the anti-colonial cultural identity struggles in francophone Africa, Umar Isa ironizes: “We were even taught to laugh like French men!”

From this perspective on the state and the society, one can draw that for Umar Isa, the most significant problem for Muslims in Niger is the political and administrative gap that mark the relationship between the state and the society. This paradox of contemporary Muslim society “ordered organizations such as *Izala* which seek to remind leaders of their responsibility. Whenever a society is in strife, look at their leaders! The failure of a society is incumbent upon their leaders”, he says. Therefore, in order to resolve this gap, *Kitab wa Sunna* undertakes social transformation initiatives (Sounaye 2009a; Meunier 1998), not necessarily in attempting to capture the state apparatus, but rather in promoting Islamic learning. This is expected to provide Islamic norms additional role in the political arena and ultimately affect the moral economy of a society where, in Umar Isa’s view, “people are Muslim, but the state is only half-Islamic”.

This criticism of the “half-Islamic state”, as some *ulama* have characterized Niger, should be understood against the background of the rise of political Islam since the beginning of the 1990s. Within such a context state

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3. Umar Isa, Interview, Niamey, July, 2004.

authorities have consistently sought to keep Islamic ideologues at bay, claiming that the constitution prohibits them from entering into politics. According to this leader, however, “what people have feared, and still fear, is that the government strays from Islam and Muslim values. When the state imposes measures and norms which deviate from Muslims’ expectations, they can’t help but defend their vision of a Muslim society”.

He further elaborates on this rejection of the secular norms as he emphasizes the need for Muslims to be guaranteed the legal and political conditions for a true Muslim life, “because that is the way they are supposed to live (*rayuwa al umma*)”. Therefore, if authorities do not promote Islam, they should not impede its progress. In another context, he argues that it is not an option in Niger to keep Islam out of the political arena (Umar Isa 2004).

*Kitab wa Sunna* and Umar Isa in particular, regularly resorts to the notion of *Magarbacin Kwarey* to emphasize the unfitness of Niger’s political elite. This Hausa phrase means literally “the good leader” and conveys for *Izala* discourse a key meaning and a critical ethical stand. It stresses not only the fact that a good leader should know how to manage power and achieve political stability in his country; it implies also his ability to establish and maintain moral guidance. From this perspective, only those who “know Islam” (“*ma sanan adini*”) could assume this responsibility. Although in everyday speech the phrase may not have any religious connotation, with the rise of *Izala* and the politicization of Islamic discourse, it gained preeminence and became a central concept of Muslim political demands. It prescribes an assessment of Muslim politics on ethical ground and assumes that whatever is Islamic can only serve the well-being of the society. When Umar Isa uses this notion, it connotes a good moral order and suggests the ability to lead the community even in a manner that may not please the public, but in line with the common good.

Therefore, that the leader be required to be *Magabarcin Kwarey* (good leader) is nothing but natural, because governance requires trustworthiness, vision, and fear of God (*tsoron Allah*). According to Umar Isa, Usman Dan Fodio is the leader who has shown and put to work these attributes of “good leadership”. The theocratic rule he imposed on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hausaland and beyond exerts a powerful fascination on the *Izala* and is often referred to as the *Dawla Usmaniyya*<sup>4</sup>. The reference to the *Dawla* (state) implies that Usman Dan Fodio was not a mere theologian or political theorist, but a man of action who transformed his community and demonstrated that true Islamic dominion is at reach. His action has therefore convinced that an Islamic social order is possible outside of the prophetic temporal and geographical context.

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4. The Islamic rule Usman Dan Fodio and his family established from 1809 to 1903.

*Izala*, and Umar Isa have often brought in their discourses this dimension of the grandeur of the *Usmaniyya*, both in justifying their calls for a “pure Islam” and the end of un-Islamic rule. During our almost 2-hours conversation in the *Markaz* of *Kitab wa Sunna*, he constantly returned to the issue of the legitimacy of the state and its ruling authorities. He contrasts this with “the era of the Shehu” (“*lokacin Shehu*”) when Islam was the norm and the source of law. For example, he repeatedly referred to Niger as “*Kasa Musulmi*”, literally, “abode of Muslims”, to emphasize the fact that politics and leadership have wandered off the path of Islam. Hence the imperative for organizations like his to “work” (“*Aiki*”) for the reinstatement of the Islamic order (*doka islama*).

How Usman Dan Fodio was able to redefine politics and at the same time the moral economy of his time inspires this activist, especially because a new crop of leaders was brought to power under Shehu’s rule (Sulaiman 1986). Not only did Usman Dan Fodio think Islam should shape governance and communal life, but unlike many *ulama* of his time and even before him, he created the Islamic polity. “Shehu”, Umar Isa says, “transformed the country by showing to people the path to Islam (*Hanya Adini*)”.

According to Umar Isa, one of the lessons to take from the revolution Usman Dan Fodio achieved is that any society that doesn’t take into consideration the religious identity of its people faces a great peril. Returning to this issue, he points to the reform agenda his organization is pursuing and clarifies his point:

“It is not that Islam is not taken into consideration. Those in power are all Muslims. one needs only to consider their names: Muhammad *kaza wa kaza*<sup>5</sup> [...] Abdoulrahman *kaza wa kaza* [...] Mamane *kaza wa kaza* [...]. But, of course, being nominally Muslim is not enough [...] we are looking for ways of living by Islam; we should model our lives along the *Sunna* [...]. We cannot compromise when it comes to the *Sunna*, because that is the only way of practicing Islam. Islam is nothing but following the Prophet [...]. We have to decry (*bayani*) all other practices of secrecy, which are actually nothing but ways of [using Islam] to make a living. We say no to these practices because there is no secrecy in [true] Islam. We refuse to rely on anything but the Quar’an and the Hadiths” (Umar Isa)<sup>6</sup>.

This statement describes the model of *Sunna* Umar Isa is pursuing, but it also captures a major criticism against the Sufi brotherhoods and other *Mallamai* (Muslim scholars, in Hausa) who, in *Izala*’s views, have made Islam a matter of secrecy and a *fonds de commerce*. Here again, Umar Isa recalls the criticisms Usman Dan Fodio addressed against Muslim scholars who surrounded the *King* of Gobir, abode by his laws and showed him loyalty even when his decisions contradicted Islam and abused his people.

5. *Kaza wa kaza* is an Arabic phrase meaning “so and so”.

6. Umar Isa, Interview, Niamey, July, 2004.

In fact, Usman Dan Fodio's reform found its socioreligious justification in the moral corruption of this category that, rather than advising the ruler to "command the good", have either led him astray or decided to maintain the *statu quo*, which serves their selfish interest (Sulaiman 1986; Last 1967). They kept the word of Islam for themselves and continued to enjoy a position of power. Umar Isa draws a parallel between contemporary Niger and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Gobir<sup>7</sup> social and political context. The same critique applies to the current context, especially when he points to the democratization era within which "everyone claims to be a learned Muslim and entitled to speak for Islam". In Umar Isa's views, the *Mallamai* are to blame for three reasons: first, their refusal to popularize Islam, a religious duty that falls on all Muslims, especially the learned of them; then, they added innovations to the religion and transformed it into a business; and finally, they have supported a political order that has little consideration for the *Sunna*.

Not surprisingly, observes Umar Isa, the result was the constitution of a clientele the *Mallamai* keep under their control and to which "they sell various services". While they engaged in these transactions, they violated the moral basis of their responsibility as religious leaders and therefore servants of the *Sunna*. In doing so, the *Mallamai* have become the "obstacle to the spread of the *Sunna*, and as Usman Dan Fodio's *jihad* did, we should fight them". For the *Izala* discourse, this loss of credibility is the main reason why the *Mallamai* can neither be entrusted with the education of the young Muslims nor should they advise the ruler<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the concept of "*Mallaman Sunna*" ("the scholars who follow the *Sunna*") *Izala* emphasizes, as opposed to the "*Mallaman Ikko*" or "*Mallaman Gumnati*" ("the scholars who serve the regime in place"), is one more image Umar Isa and his companions expect to see reflecting contemporary Islamic authority.

Thus the call to *Sunna* characteristic of Umar Isa's organization has two main implications: First, to combat the authority *Mallamai* have gained; and second, to inspire Muslims to follow in the footsteps of earlier Muslim leaders. More specifically, this call is reinterpreted in line of a revivalist theory that recalls both Usman Dan Fodio and Aboubakar Gumi<sup>9</sup> two major figures that have reshaped Islam in the region.

7. Gobir is one of the 7 States that formed Hausaland. Usman Dan Fodio's *Jihad* started there and spread across the region.

8. Education is particularly important to the *Izala* social project. In both Niger and Nigeria, the learning centers represented the starting point of the *Izala* social reform agenda. The *madrasa* created within this context played a key role in providing the *Izala* discourse with an arena to prosper and expand beyond the confines of the mosque.

9. Sheik Abubakar Gumi is one of the founders of the initial *Izala* in Nigeria. *Izala* as an organization and discourse emerged in the 1970s in Nigeria before it spread to Niger in the late 1980s. See MEUNIER (1998), SOUNAYE (2009b), for additional readings on Gumi and *Izala*, see KANE (2003), LOIMEIER (1997) and UMAR (1993).

The evocation of Usman Dan Fodio and his “contribution to the expansion” of Islam (*ci gaban adini*) seems to be central in Umar Isa’s effort to explain the “work” (“*aikin adini*”) of the *Izala* movement. First, as I noted above, for Umar Isa, Usman Dan Fodio proved to be an inspiring defender of Islam and a promoter of a pious life. His concerns about the proper practice of Islam led him to oppose the Hausa customs (*al’adu*), but also the whole political structure of his time. He challenged the dominant moral and political order and was eventually able to overthrow it. The significance of this lies in the way many Muslims have interpreted the advent of his rule and the social reform he implemented. Revolutionary, as many scholars of political Islam have argued, Usman Dan Fodio’s *jihad* represented the materialization of a new era not only in political terms, but also for Islam and re-Islamization processes in the region. In contemporary Niger, the Sokoto Caliphate is often viewed as a template for contemporary (*zamanin yaw*) efforts to enforce the rule of the *Sunna*.

Relying on the paradigmatic differentiation between *bid’a* (unlawful innovation) and *Sunna* (the way of life inspired by Muhammad) and their qualification as respectively blameworthy and praiseworthy, Umar Isa’s narrative indicates a central preoccupation in the Islamic tradition. Usman Dan Fodio has fought for the removal of *bida’a* and the revivification of the *Sunna*; he has demonstrated that the Islamic moral order can be a historical reality as was Muhammad’s community at the beginning of Islam. The emphasis on the early Muslim community in the *Izala* discourse is intended to show both the materiality and the feasibility of an Islamic dominion, but it is also evoked to enhance a sense of commitment to the construction of the contemporary *Sunna* order.

I have argued elsewhere that the *Izala* in Niger, and by extension in West Africa, has produced a mode of sociability that recalls the intentional community (Sounaye 2009b). The pursuit of a sociopolitical order informed by the *Sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad rests the core ideological vision of the *Izala* project. That is why it does not tolerate lax practices as it puts the burden of the construction of this moral order on the learned and the rulers. This conjunction of powers, one may say, points to the political nature of the *Izala* positions. *Izala* is known for its stance on education and its emphasis on the power of learning to transform Muslim practices and the society as a whole. That makes the position of the *ulama* even more critical especially because they are the guardians of the Islamic tradition, and, as instructors and educators, the best defenders of the *Sunna*.

“In Muslim history, there are often contexts where *bid’a* intrudes into people’s life. The learned, those whose role is to lead and enlighten the community, just don’t bear their responsibilities. They let go and do nothing about the mixing of *al’adu* with Islam. Fortunately, and as the Prophet said, Allah always sends someone to remind people of the proper Islamic way and practice. Shehu Usmanu Dan Hodio is among the few people Allah selected for such work. He took the task of calling people back to Islam, showing that people have diverted and gone astray. He was

involved in *wa'zi* (sermons) and even led a war, a *Jihad*. He used force and Allah helped him redress' Muslim practice. With the help of Allah, many joined him to build the community of the fighters for Islam" (Umar Isa)<sup>10</sup>.

This is a historical reference that marks Umar Isa's consciousness of Islam and his activism. But this reading of history is not exclusive to this religious actor, or the *Izala* as a movement. Muslims in Hausaland have often seen Usman Dan Fodio with positive eyes and a nationalistic tone reminiscent of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Islamist discourses. Some stress piety and his exemplary degree of conviction; others emphasize his political role, seeing in him and his dominion the antithesis of the colonial rule and the model of the proper indigenous rule. As the leader of the fight for the reinstatement of the *Sunna*, Usman Dan Fodio inspires the order of the *Sunna*. He created an organized body that determined the success of the fight for Islam, almost in a prophetic manner.

Furthermore, when Umar Isa claims that his organization produces no new interpretation (*fahamta*) of the Muslim *Adini* (*Adini Musulminci*), but follows sound leaders like Usman Dan Fodio, he elevates this leader to what one may call the *Izala pious ancestry* (*Salaf e Saleh*)<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, in defending themselves against the criticism that they are trouble-makers, *Izala* followers respond that they are not remaking history and that their goal and the issues they are concerned about are not new to Muslims. "We invent nothing unlike many other Muslims", but only "follow in the footsteps of a *Magabarcin Kwarey*", they might add, a pattern of *Izala* discourse exemplified again by the views Yahaya expresses in the next section.

### *Ihyau Sunna: Serving the Sunna, eliminating bid'a*

As I already noted, *Ihyau Sunna* was created after the initial *Izala* organization, *Adini Islam*, was banned and in the midst of divergences among the *Izala* leaders. It enjoys a visibility only a few Islamic organizations can claim in Niger. Sheikh Yahaya led *Adini Islam* until 2000 when it was banned. When *Ihyau Sunna* was created in 2001, his fellows trusted his experience and asked him to assume the presidency of the organization. He remained in this position until he passed away in 2010. The elimination of *bid'a* and the revivification of the *Sunna* are the major preoccupations of the organization *Ihyau Sunna*. I must draw attention to the fact that one of Usman Dan Fodio's writings is precisely entitled *Ihyau Sunna wa ikhmad al-bid'a* and is concerned with the revivification of the *Sunna* and the removal of the *bid'a*.

10. Umar Isa, Interview. Niamey, July, 2004.

11. On the status of Usman Dan Fodio as a Salafi, see MASRI (1978 : 18).

A shop owner in the Waddata market of Niamey and for longtime the face of *Izala* in Niger, he was trained in Niger and Northern Nigeria, where he was exposed to the *Izala* discourse. During our conversation, most of his statements aimed to demonstrate the urgency for Muslims in Niger to grasp the meaning of “their religion and help *Sunna* expand”. The notion of *Aikin Sunna* (serving the *Sunna*) he uses sums up this call. It centers on the removal of *bid’a*, “anything Muhammad has proscribed and discouraged people from doing. *Bid’a* is anything introduced in *adini*, which falsely claims to be part of our faith. It is whatever contradicts the *Sunna*” (Yahaya)<sup>12</sup>.

In Niger, the *Izala* discourses have often emphasized the fact that *bid’a* represents a major threat to Islam. Therefore, for Yahaya, demarcating *Sunna* and *bid’a* is both a theological responsibility and a call for duty. It constitutes the principle on which rest the understanding of the prophetic message and the proper practice of Islam. The cohabitation of the two is not viable in Muslim context, since *bid’a* exposes the *Sunna* to the risk of being diluted and eventually destroyed. Because the simple fact of tolerating the *bid’a* can be fatal to the *Sunna*, the only option for the proper Islamic practice, according to this position, is to take action and eliminate *bid’a*. This explains the creation of *Adini Islam* and later on, of *Ihyau Sunna*:

“We noticed that many *bid’a* have been introduced in Islam. This has resulted in the death’ of the *Sunna*, a situation no Muslim should accept. Our task today is to revive the *Sunna* and lay *bid’a* to rest. That’s the reason why we decided to bear this important name [*Ihyau Sunna*]. And as everyone knows, there have been in the history of Islam in Hausaland and the neighborhood, a great *Sunna* combatant: Shehu Dan Fodio [...] you have probably heard about him [...] he was one of these early fighters who realized the danger of letting *bid’a* prosper while the *Sunna* was dying (*mutuwa*). Islam cannot expand if we relax on the prescriptions of Islam” (Yahaya)<sup>13</sup>.

The metaphors of death/killing and survival/revival are central to this *alem*’s (Muslim scholar, sing. of *Ulama*) discourse and to the *Izala* rhetoric as a whole. They further dramatize the situation and emphasize the urgency to act. Like Umar Isa, Yahaya sets Usman Dan Fodio at the pinnacle of the local history of Islam. He portrays him as the ultimate hero of the *Sunna* and recognizes him an insight into how to deal with *bid’a*. In Yahaya’s view, however, the most important to note is that Usman Dan Fodio “undertook this [fight] *Fi Sabilalahi*<sup>14</sup>. No one forced him into this, only his *Iman*<sup>15</sup> told him the path to follow”.

Let’s note that Yahaya’s perspective on saving the *Sunna* relies on a victimization narrative. Consequently, if Muslims bear the responsibility

12. Sheikh Yahaya Ahmed, Interview, Niamey, July 2004.

13. *Ibid.*

14. In the name of God.

15. Faith, trust in God.

to establish the rule of the *Sunna*, it appears that they cannot achieve this goal without protecting and nurturing their tradition. Thus, the most pressing matter resides in dealing with the aggression various forms of *bid'a* have launched on the *Sunna*. While Umar Isa seems to justify the propagation of the *Sunna* on the ground that for their common good, Muslims should fight for the *Sunna*, regardless of their social conditions, Yahaya adopts another perspective in describing the current situation in terms of “aggression” and “death”, two concepts that help his organization mobilize those who call themselves “*Sunna* fighters”. According to the *Izala* narrative, revivalism appears then as the condition of the survival of the *Sunna*, especially because *bid'a* and *Sunna* are mutually exclusive: the triumph of one supposes the loss of the other.

For Yahaya, the cultivation of the *Sunna* is primarily based on the idea that this tradition is victim of an aggression that finds its roots within the political logic that supports Nigerien society, and Muslim practices. Therefore, there will be no *Sunna* order without a radical structural transformation of the Nigerien society. He resorts to Usman Dan Fodio's contribution as he portrays him as “the first to come to this realization and draw the conclusion to wage *Jihad*”. Thus Usman Dan Fodio is a “pioneer who undertook early on the popularization and defense of the *Sunna*” within a hostile socio-political context.

In claiming that a proper Muslim life is first and foremost, modeled by the *Sunna*, *Izala* articulate a maximalism (Lincoln 2003) in which no other source of values can compete with the *Sunna*. This transpires in the positions Yahaya and his organization have taken on many social and political issues, including the attempts by the state to reform family law in the 1990s (Sounaye 2005, 2009a). His fierce opposition to this legal project earned him a social and political capital that reinforced his position as a leader and servant of the *Sunna*. The point that Muslims should fight to preserve their tradition and protect the *Sunna* actually gains a wide support among Muslims, including followers of *Ihyau Sunna* who “realize then the anti-Islamic consequences of this reform”. In part, Yahaya's metaphor of the killing of the *Sunna* originates within this political context and serves a mobilization agenda. It urges Muslims to take action and assume the responsibility of protecting and reviving the *Sunna*. More specifically, since “*al'adu* and *bid'a* are the enemies of the *Sunna*” and represent the very practices that will denature the *Sunna* and eventually “destroy” it, Muslims should commit to “*Sunna* work” (“*aikin Sunna*”). One modality of this work is involvement in *da'wa*, the call to Islam, performed primarily through preaching rallies across the country. The urgency is then to reverse the trend of *bid'a*, to kill it (*kashewa bid'a*) and keep *al'adu* away from contaminating *adini*. For the servants of the *Sunna* that gather around Yahaya's organization, there seems to be no alternative for the reinstatement and the consecration (*tabata*) of the *Sunna*.

Highlighting how Yahaya calls to memory the “*aiki*” (“œuvre”) of Usman Dan Fodio for the purpose of his religious agenda is however worth mentioning. In effect, *Ihyau Sunna* borrows Usman Dan Fodio’s doctrine of the revitalization of the *Sunna*, which is based on a critique of the *ulama* and their association with the ruling elite, as I have already mentioned. Following Usman Dan Fodio, Yahaya articulates a theologico-political criticism that targets two elite social categories: the political elite, which rule the state system, and the religious elite, which enjoy a social capital that could easily translate into economic benefit or political influence. While the first category is criticized for its lack of interest in Islam, the second category is said to be too complacent, compromising with the law of God and therefore refusing to “serve Islam”, its statutory mission.

This pattern of religious discourse, especially as it lies on the past to shape and transform the present is characteristic of the groups and movements that claim reform or revivalism (Willis 1967). This *convocation du passé*, to use Triaud’s formula (Chrétien & Triaud 1999: 9-12; Triaud 1999), occurs in a context where *Ihyau Sunna* is searching for legitimacy for its anti-Sufi stance. Building on Usman Dan Fodio and his symbolic value as a *Sunna* hero is an additional way of providing legitimacy to *Ihyau*’s reform discourse.

In effect, *Izala* in Niger has been under harsh attack from the Tidjaniyya and their sympathizers. One major criticism has described the *yan Izala* (*Izala* followers, in Hausa) as socially irresponsible, zealous newcomers and individualist, especially when they decree that social events like wedding and naming ceremonies should not lead to ostentatious expenses. *Ihyau Sunna* may be strategically using Usman Dan Fodio, but it seems to me unlikely that resorting to Usman Dan Fodio in this context serves only a strategic purpose. Pronouncements other Muslim activists have made show that the tendency to portray Usman Dan Fodio as the model to follow is a practice one finds outside of the *Ihyau Sunna* and *Kitab wa Sunna* circles. For example, at the ANASI (Association nigérienne pour l’aide et la solidarité islamique) mosque (Mosquée Usman Dan Fodio) a Muslim activist made the following point:

“Shehu and his family have been the first significant contributors to the effort to correct Muslim practices in this region. As a woman, his daughter has shown us that we can be religious scholars and leaders as long as we are committed to Islam. She has also showed us that the service owed to Islam (*Aikin Adini*) does not fall only on men. Rather, it falls on every Muslim whether within the space of their home or on the market place”<sup>16</sup>.

In this case, it is not so much what Usman Dan Fodio has accomplished *per se* that imports the most, but the avenues of possibility his model has

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16. Aisha, Interview, Niamey, ANASI, June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

opened up. Remembering him, is thus an active effort at interpreting what his accomplishment means for Muslim actors in contemporary Niger. The eclectic—as opposed to systematic—use of his symbol further reinforces the idea that strategically, the evocation of Usman Dan Fodio can do nothing but serve Muslim politics, in particular the re-Islamization discourses *en vogue*. Because he is portrayed as the political leader who put to work the principles of the *Sunna*, he plays a key role in the ideologization of the *Sunna* narrative.

### Historicity, Reform and the Rethinking of *Izala* Problematic

It is a common knowledge that religious movements are often based on a peculiar interpretation and reproduction of history (Eliade 1958, 1971; Willis 1967; Berkey 1995; Chrétien & Triaud 1999). Whether they reconstruct with pieces that already exist or carve anew with new narratives and imagery, the major form of relation they display is historicity, an awareness of historical continuities, but also an understanding of the past as a tool that serves shape narratives (Hirsch & Stewart 2005: 263). The present is perceived and lived as the time when the past reveals its truth and exhibits its power as the origin and the reason for the present. Usman Dan Fodio may be a figure of the past, but he is very much a character of the present in the *Izala* historiography. What we are offered with both leaders I presented, —and ultimately *Kitab wa Sunna* and *Ihyau Sunna*—and overall through the *Izala* narratives is the view that Usman Dan Fodio's struggle to build the rule of the *Sunna* is a prime *Izala* moment.

Willis was already alluding to this dimension of religious imagination when he tried to differentiate between revivalism and reformism. The main difference, he notes, lies in how these processes relate to time and history. While the first seeks to reintroduce the past, taking inspiration for the present in the past, the second process is highly determined by a perspective on the future. He states:

“Revivalism, as distinct from reformism, is in emphasis backward-looking, implying a desire to return to former customs and institutions. In contrast, reformism is more forward-looking, implying an effort to adjust or change present customs and institutions to the demands and needs of contemporary societies” (Willis 1967: 395).

Obviously, this doesn't mean revivalism has no sense of the future. At the same time, we cannot conclude that reform has no interest in the past, either. Both are essentially concerned with history and historicity. The point that I would like to make mine is the permanence of history in both reform and revivalism. Scholars have applied both labels to the *Izala* (Balogun 1979; Umar 1993; Loimeier 1997; Meunier 1998; Kane 2003; Maikorema 2007; Masquelier 1999; Sounaye 2009b). For the purpose of

my discussion here, the most apparent dimension in relation to Usman Dan Fodio is revivalism. But Usman Dan Fodio has also been viewed as the model of the political leader who reformed his society by implementing a religious rule, making actual what was viewed as a distant potential. The actualization of this potential, to use an Aristotelian language, is the merit most *Izala* followers read in the *Usmaniyya*.

When concerns about authenticity are articulated and innovations viewed as inherently suspect, reform and revitalization are claimed and often invested with a salutary attribute. The effacement/elimination/removal of *bid'a*, the restoration/revivification/reinstatement of the *Sunna*, and similar notions open the window on the central preoccupation about history within religious circles. We may be too quick in characterizing these forms of relation to time and history in terms of "crisis". But, perhaps, we should look at them as simple manifestations of how Muslims are being in the world and how they define and redefine their rapport to history. It is precisely within this framework that I see calling *Izala* a Wahhabi organization to be a misnomer because not only are we overlooking the *Izala* reservoir of signs, symbols and narratives, but we miss also the opportunity to problematize *Izala* as a category we use to make sense of a religious discourse that emerged in West Africa.

Therefore, resorting to Usman Dan Fodio and bestowing his legacy with the symbolism we see with *Izala* discourses in Niger should be read as the illustration of religious historicity which calls for a rethinking of our categories and their conceptual paradigms. In this regard, Usman Dan Fodio is not simply a figure of the past. He is given a vivid form and influence in the present as both perspectives I presented claim to be inspired by his model. I was struck by the way in both *Izala* discursive characterizations no criticism of Usman Dan Fodio was articulated, despite his well-known affiliation with a Sufi brotherhood. Does it mean the *Izala* anti-Sufism is selective? Or does it mean there is still an aspect of the *Izala* that needs to be studied? What does this "silencing" of criticism tell us about the *Izala* and its anti-Sufi stance as a whole? And what consequences these questions and theoretical perspectives have on our characterization of *Izala* as a Wahhabi organization?

Because of the nature of the re-Islamization project in Niger, Usman Dan Fodio seems to provide the most available and pertinent reference one may think of: an "inward-looking ideology" (Hunwick 1996) that produces versions of the expansion of Islam, but also of the materialization of a theocracy. Here are subjects who look back to Usman Dan Fodio, his *Jihad*, his community and his stance on Islam, and seek to rethink and restructure their institutions according to the unprecedented model he set. Certainly nationalistic, *Izala* discourses end up making Usman Dan Fodio a historical myth, which serves their *raison d'être*, i.e. the crusade against *bid'a* and the reinstatement of the *Sunna*.

W. Graham (1983) is right in stressing the significance of history for Islam when he argues that Islam is a history-centered religion. I would like to add that more than Islam, it is the practice of Muslims to reimagine the history of their tradition and reinvest it within their everyday religious commerce. That *Ihyau Sunna* and *Kitab wa Sunna* live in a commemorative mode is not surprising since, as their Prophet has shown and commanded, they have a message to appropriate and a *Sunna* to make their own. Reform and revival are thus only parts of the vocabulary that seeks to characterize this particular relation to time and tradition. In the specific case of the *Izala* movement, the divide Willis (1967) establishes may be misleading since the idea of reform, especially in its puritanist connotation, can be hardly thought as disconnected from the concern about the past defined as the reservoir where the normative framework should take its core constituents.

My own experience of the proactive approach of the *Izala* in Niger tells a story that favors rather an associative mode in which reform and revivalism—if we still need to keep these categories—serve the same purpose of re-islamization. Usman Dan Fodio's figure provides an illustration of this complicated picture within which dichotomization such as Salafi/Sufi are also secondary, in particular when we look at how the *Qadiri*<sup>17</sup> belonging of Usman Dan Fodio did not disqualify him from inspiring groups and formations whose leitmotif is to fight associationism, esoteric practices and remove (*Izala*) innovations (*bid'a*). In many ways, he has received even more recognition within the *Izala* circles.

Umar Isa makes the point that “in Islam there is nothing of secret; nothing is secret” [*babu abin boyo acikin adini*]. Of course, the insistence on the notion that Islam despises secrecy is a direct criticism of Sufi practices that have favored esoterism and the perception that only a few elect can access to a benefit religion provides. In a sense, Umar Isa's discourse speaks for the populist ideal that marks *Izala* intentions and their perception of a true Muslim society. Strict in their rejection of secrecy, they go as far as to suspect anything the Prophet has never done or recommended. Casting all and everything in terms of their relationship to *bid'a* and *Sunna*, authenticity becomes in this context the anxiety of the *Izala* subject as Umar Isa insists that every gestures and deed must be measured against the norm of the *Sunna*.



17. A sufi brotherhood founded by the Bagdadi scholar Abdel Qadr al Jilani (1078-1166). Until the 1970s, the Qadiriyya was one of the main Islamic trends in West Africa. It had a significant impact on the religious sphere in all countries across the Sahel, particularly in Mauritania.

In the debate over what is the proper Islamic practice as introduced by the *Izala*'s effort to reform Islamic practices, a tension between continuity and rupture has arisen. For its critics, the *Izala* discourse is too scripturalist and politicized. They claim that *Izala* seeks and promotes a reconfiguration of power and authority in the Islamic sphere that would serve their individual or group interests. Under this guise, the *Izala* appears as an opportunistic socioreligious movement only concerned with rearrangement of authority.

But, in the *Izala* perspective, the meaning of the *Sunna* cannot be dissociated from continuity. Both the connection they make with the Prophet and their fascination with the Usman Dan Fodio's theocracy reinforce such a claim. In other words, what *Izala* underscores is that archaism, this intention to inform the present by looking at the past practices, norms and values, is key to revivalism. The case of *Kitab wa Sunna*, especially through the views of Umar Isa, is a powerful reminder that our social and political actions are often determined by the kind of historical consciousness we develop. This is particularly evident within religious circles where revivalism has become the main channel for the expression of religiosity.

As a number of Islamic organizations now identify themselves as *Izala*, it is striking to see the way Dan Fodio's *jihad* is remembered and appropriated by initiatives that seek to build in Niger a "true Islamic society". It is certainly counterintuitive to hear an *Izala* adept celebrate the legacy of a Sufi Sheikh. Yet, both *Ihyau Sunna* and *Kitab wa Sunna*, the two most prominent *Izala* organizations in Niger have done so. This might be intriguing to us just because we have not yet understood the modes of imagination of history *Izala* produces and the "making" of the *Izala* itself as a reform discourse. Obviously, we have not done enough the genealogy of these discourses. In this sense, anti-Sufism, I tried to show, is a misnomer and not sufficient to define *Izala* and the trend of re-Islamization it has inaugurated in Niger. Thus, *Izala* rapport to Usman Dan Fodio calls for a rethinking of our mapping of Islamic discourses and the analytical tools we use in such endeavor.

Perhaps, what the *Izala* appropriation of Usman Dan Fodio achieves is not so much a call to redefine *Izala*, as a readjusting of our conceptual map, which seeks to make sense of this trend. Empirical evidence in this regard shows that in resorting to Usman Dan Fodio, some *Izala* discursive practices urge us to assess the connections we have assumed between the Sufi and the anti-Sufi trends.

My focus in the present article has been on two *Izala* voices in Niger. The appropriation of Usman Dan Fodio in Nigeria could be equally interesting to analyze. As Loimeier (1997: 4) has shown, claiming the legacy of Shehu has become a major dimension of Muslims' presence in the Nigerian political arena. What forms of appropriations of Usman Dan Fodio are perceptible within the *Izala* discourses in Nigeria could be a ground for a comparative archeology of the movement across borders.

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#### ABSTRACT

The academic accounts of Islamic reform in Niger have focused on the *Izala* movement, reducing it to an anti-Sufism. When these representations stress the wahhabi-salafi tendency of this movement, not only *Izala* appears as the Sufi foe, it is also viewed as a brand of Islamic discourse of foreign origin. This article shows that these accounts have told only part of the genealogy of *Izala*. References to Sheikh Usman Dan Fodio's 19<sup>th</sup> century *jihad* are pervasive in *Izala* discourse despite the fact that he was affiliated with the *Qadiriyya* Sufi order. Dan Fodi's acts, deeds and ideas are consistently read as *Izala* moments. The evidence presented is based on the pronouncements made by two *Izala* organizations. Both illustrate how the *Izala* reform has continuously appropriated and reinvented the legacy of Usman Dan Fodio, recasting this historical figure as the "true" Sunni and the Sheikh of the Sunna. Theoretically, what is at stake here is not so much how *Izala* operates, but how accounts of this movement have relied on a dichotomy Sufi/Anti-Sufi which contributes to rigidify our categories and therefore handicap our conceptual apparatus. In this sense, while highlighting how Usman Dan Fodio has become a "lieu de mémoire", this article seeks to shed some light on the genealogy of this Islamic reform discourse, and interrogate the categories used to characterize it. What the *Izala* appropriation of Usman Dan Fodio achieves is not so much a call to redefine *Izala*, as a readjustment of our conceptual map, which seeks to make sense of this movement.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*Les héritiers du cheikh Izala et ses appropriations d'Usman Dan Fodio au Niger.* — Les études d'*Izala* au Niger ont surtout porté sur des caractères qui ont réduit ce mouvement de réforme islamique à un anti-soufisme. À travers les représentations qui mettent en exergue ses tendances wahabi-salafistes, *Izala* apparaît non seulement à l'opposé du soufisme, mais est aussi perçu comme un mouvement venu d'ailleurs.

Cet article démontre que ces représentations ne font qu'une généalogie partielle d'*Izala*. En effet, malgré son appartenance à la confrérie *Qadiriyya*, Usman Dan Fodio inspire beaucoup les discours et les pratiques *Izala*. Dans les milieux *Izala*, son œuvre, ses actes et ses idées sont aujourd'hui perçus comme de véritables moments *izala*. La thèse avancée par l'auteur repose sur les discours et les représentations de deux organisations qui illustrent toutes les deux la façon dont *Izala* se réapproprie et réinvente l'héritage d'Usman Dan Fodio tout en le célébrant comme le véritable sunnite et cheikh de la *sunna*. D'un point de vue théorique, l'intérêt de la démarche ici est moins d'analyser le mode d'action d'*Izala*, que de noter la façon dont la littérature sur ce mouvement s'est surtout inspirée d'une dichotomie soufi/anti-soufi, qui, dans le cas d'espèce, contribue à une rigidité des catégories et de l'appareil conceptuel que nous utilisons pour rendre compte de ce mouvement. De ce point de vue, en analysant comment Usman Dan Fodio est présenté comme un "lieu de mémoire", cet article voudrait porter un éclairage nouveau sur la généalogie de ce discours de réforme et en même temps interroger les catégories utilisées pour le décrire. En fait, l'intérêt de cette appropriation d'Usman Dan Fodio réside moins dans l'interpellation à redéfinir *Izala* que dans la nécessité de repenser notre dispositif conceptuel face à ce courant.

Keywords/Mots-clés: *Izala*, Usman Dan Fodio, genealogy, memory, re-islamization, Sufi and Anti-Sufism/*Izala*, *Usman Dan Fodio*, mémoire, généalogie, re-islamisation, soufisme et anti-soufisme.