

# Interweaving urban land tenure, spatial expansion and political institutions: An urban history of Niamey, Niger

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## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 October 2020;  
Accepted 16 April 2021

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## Abstract

This monographic overview article presents an urban history of Niger's capital Niamey with the lens on three aspects: the urban and spatial development, the evolution of urban land rights, and the dynamics of socio-political institutions. It is based on the sparse scientific and grey literature, available mostly in French, and aims to provide a concise overview in English on the becoming of this rather unknown Sahelian capital. Obviously, the development of the city is shaped by public policies on urban land as well as by the social and political organization at the local and supra-local levels. The city's political and spatial evolution is therefore traced through the following four stages: (1) from the pre-colonial origins on which the foundations of land rights date, (2) to the colonial period, where the foundations of the city and the country were laid, (3) to the first decades after independence with its rather repressive policies on urban planning, (4) and finally the last three decades of democratization and rapid urbanisation. A chronological narrative is used for this urban history of Niamey, especially for the pre-colonial and colonial periods which are less documented in literature and seem more homogeneous in terms of the direction of change. From independence onwards, however, urban, political, institutional and land developments become more complex and the literature more abundant. The chronological narrative is therefore abandoned from this point on, in favour of a more thematic narrative through the post-colonial and contemporary decades.

**Key words:** Urban history, land tenure, spatial development, political institutions, urbanisation, literature review, Niamey, Niger

## 1. Introduction: the urban fact in the Sahel

The Sahel, and Niger in particular, is generally perceived through the rural lens, and this not only by outsiders but also by Nigerien nationals themselves. This has certainly its valuable explanations, but there are at least three reasons why the study of the urban in the Sahel, and especially in Niger, matters never the less.

First, Niger has an outstanding position in terms of urbanization worldwide: it is one of the least urbanized countries on an overall moderate urbanized African continent, but belongs to a group of countries with the most accelerated urbanization rates worldwide (see Parnell & Pieterse, 2014). The latest statistics on urban development in Niger indicate that about 17% of the population lives in urban centres, however, the absolute number of the

urban population is about to increase at a pace of 4.3% per annum (World Bank, 2020). Niger is thus rapidly urbanizing and there are two main reasons for this: one is the persistently high fertility rate with more than seven children per woman in average, especially in the rural places but not only. As a other factor comes rural-urban migration, and this not only due to lack of economic opportunities and the effects of climate change in the countryside, but also as a first step of a young person's journey to adulthood, be it temporary or permanent. In the country's history, shock events such as major droughts and food crises in the second half of the 20th century also significantly contributed to the increase in the influx of impoverished rural people into Niger's cities. Secondly, in West Africa and especially in the Sahel, there is a long urban tradition, well before the colonial era, and life in urban communities is *per se* nothing new for the population (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1988 and 2006, Poinot, Sternadel, Sinou, & Mabounou, 1984). Pre-colonial migrants in the Niger region, Hausa, Songhay-Zarma or Fulani populations, among others, were therefore familiar with the urban fact. On this point, the Sahelian urban experience significantly differs from the urban experience on the rest of the continent. In Central Africa, for example, the experience of the city dates almost exclusively from the colonial and post-colonial era (Piermay, 1993, 2003). In practice, of course, the majority of the West African population did not live in these pre-colonial urban centres either but in the rural countryside subject to the cities (see Hiribarren, 2017, Fauvelle, 2018). These people had to learn the urban fact, just like their counterparts in Central Africa, with the emergence of modern urbanization from the second half of the 20th century.

Third, the Sahelian geographical and climatic context has a major influence on the urban framework and its dynamics. Two thirds of Niger's territory are semi-arid or desert, with difficult conditions for living and agricultural production. The southern belt, located along the country's major southern border, thus hosts 80% of the Nigerien population with its various economic opportunities and infrastructure such as rain-fed agriculture and trans-border business with neighbouring Nigeria. The majority of Niger's small and middle size cities, - among them some important precolonial urban centres such as Zinder and Gobir -, are located along this southern border. The spatial structure of Niger's urban centres therefore reflects physical and economic conditions through their spatial distribution (see Bruneau, Giraut & Moriconi-

Ebrard, 1994). Future urbanization trends for Africa indicate that the strongest urban growth is to be expected in middle size cities and small towns, of which Niger has a large number besides the French-founded capital of Niamey.

In the context of these urban facts in the Sahel region, this overview literature article presents an urban history of Niamey with the lens on three aspects: the urban and spatial development, the evolution of urban land rights, and the dynamics of socio-political institutions. It is based on the rather sparse scientific and grey literature, available mostly in French, and aims to provide a concise overview in English. The city's political and spatial evolution is traced through the following four stages: from the pre-colonial origins on which the foundations of land rights date (until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century), to the colonial period where the foundations of the city and the country were laid (1900 – 1960), to the first decades after independence with its rather repressive policies on urban planning (1960 – 1990), and finally the last three decades of democratization and rapid urbanisation. A chronological narrative is used for this urban history of Niamey, more descriptive than analytical, especially for the pre-colonial and colonial periods which are less documented in literature and seem more homogeneous in terms of the direction of change. From independence onwards, however, urban, political, institutional and land developments become more complex and the literature more abundant. The chronological narrative is therefore abandoned from this point on, in favour of a more thematic narrative through the post-colonial and contemporary decades.

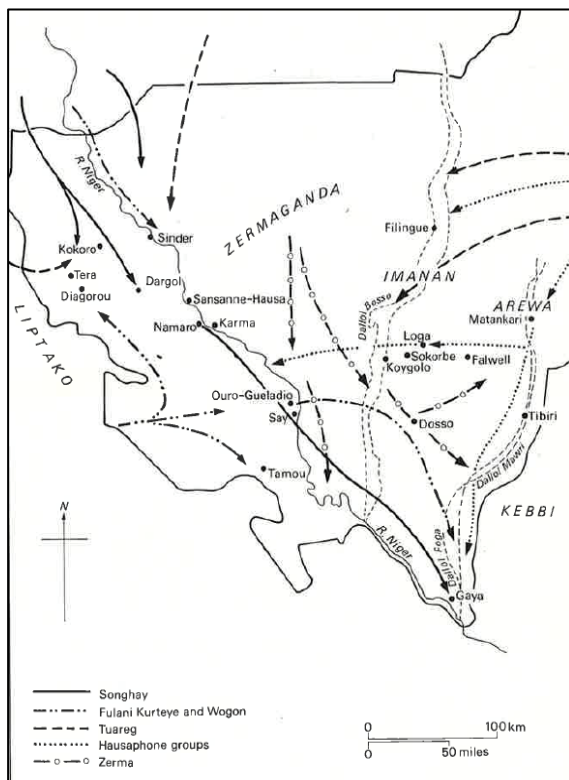
## **2. The pre-colonial period: settlement and land holdings**

In pre-colonial times, the Sahel region represented an important area of passages, encounter and exchange, but also of power struggle and territorial competition between various empires and kingdoms: In the West, the Songhay-Zarma empire along the upper Niger River (15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) (see Insoll, 2011), in the East, the Kanem-Borno empires in the Lake Chad region (9<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) (see Hiribarren, 2017) and the Hausa States in northern Nigeria (15<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) (see Gronenborn, 2011). The Caliphate of Sokoto, founded by the Fulani ruler Usman dan Fodio in present-day northwest Nigeria, was the closest pole of power to the Niamey region in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2.1. An era and an area of Sahelian empires and kingdoms

The Niamey region itself escaped all notoriety during the pre-colonial period and only received the repercussions of the great neighbouring empires. It rather served as a refugee and buffer zone for people from various backgrounds, fleeing war activities and conquests between different poles of power (Sidikou, 1980, see also Bernus, 1969, Hama, 1955, Fuglestad, 1983, Olivier de Sardan, 1984, Poinot et al., 1984). In terms of trans-Saharan trade routes, it was equally marginal and caravanners between Kano and Timbuktu avoided the area because of its political and social instability (Map 1). On the background of wars of domination, territorial occupation and kidnapping operations (*rezzou*) that strongly marked this period (Garnier, 2018, see also Fuglestad, 1983, Olivier de Sardan, 1984), Songhay and Zarma populations, fleeing the Moroccan invasion at the end of the 16th

century, left the inner-delta of the Niger river to settle down-stream in the Niamey region, as well as Hausa-speaking Maouri hunters from the East of the Dogondoutchi region, and the Fulani, the all-powerful ethnic group in the Sahel at the time. The two villages of Goudel and Gamkalé on the left bank of the Niger River, both Zarma, and located upstream and downstream respectively of the future site of Niamey, date from this turbulent 16th century period. The ethnic mix and remix of social groups from different backgrounds, so emblematic of Niamey today, thus dates far back into the past. The absence of a strong central power, the mobility of populations, competition over pastures, and frequent attacks by Tuareg groups on sedentary population further South were all reasons for a general climate of instability and mistrust among the local population. The establishment of colonial dominance from 1901 onwards thus had an effect of stabilisation, a *pax gallica* established (Garnier, 2018, Sidikou, 1980).



Map 1: Pre-colonial migration movements in Western (Fuglestad, 1983: 34)

## 2.2. The origins of Niamey

In such a situation of permanent population movements, it is difficult to trace the settlement of the Niamey site, which is based on an orally

transmitted history (Bernus, 1969, Fuglestad, 1983, Gado, 1997, Hama, 1955, Sidikou, 1980 and 2010).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that the primacy of Goudel and Gamkalé is undisputed (Sidikou, 2010: 11, Bernus, 1969: 15). As for the villages that were later installed on the future site of Niamey, there are different versions and each group recounts the events in its favour. What seems clear is the existence of three ancient villages on the left river bank, Maourey (Hausa), Kalley (Zarma) and Gaweye (Songhay from Gao) (Gado, 1997: 15), flanked by Goudel and Gamkalé, and probably settled since the early 19th century. Opposite, on the right river bank, settled successively Fulani villages (Lamordé, Nogaré and Kirkisoye). So far, everything seems pretty clear. But it is the order of their installation that remains subject to numerous controversial debates between the descendants of the first arrivals who fully play the card of narration strategies and the micro-politics of oral tradition (Lentz, 2005: 164). There are roughly three versions of founding myths, according to Sidikou (2010: 8ff) and Gado (1997: 15ff), summarized here in a simplified way.

- *Founding myth by the Maouri*: A conflict over pastures occurred between the Maouri who settled on a river island named *Néni* opposite Goudel, and the Fulani Bintinkodji (Bernus, 1969: 16ff). The latter attacked the former and drove them out so that they could in turn benefit from the island's fertility for their livestock. The survivors reportedly founded a new village further downstream from Goudel, next to a large old tree called *Gna*, a virtually extinct species. The new village was called *Gna-mé*, the 'place of the *Gna*'. According to the Maouri version, this place is at the origin of Niamey and its name.
- *Founding myth by the Zarma*: A man from the Zarma Kallé subgroup left his village of origin in the Zarmaganda region, north of Niamey, after a family land dispute and asked the people of Goudel for land to resettle. He received fields between Yantala and Gamkalé Sebangayé and told his slaves

in Zarma: "Wa gnam ne, wa gnam ne", clear out here, clear out there. Over time, the exclamation *gnam-ne* would have turned into 'Niamey'. The village founded corresponds to today Kalley district.

- *Founding myth of the Songhay*: Two Songhay fishermen from Gao, called Gaweye, left their town by boat to go downstream. One of them settled in the Tillabery area while the other continued downstream until *Yama Gungu* river island which belonged to the Fulani people. The herders left the island to the Gaweye ('those from Gao') in turn of their help related to their mythic power on water. The Gaweye finally settled on the left river bank next to the *Gunti Yena* gully mouth. They remain owners of the island and buried their dead there until the 1950s.

Whatever the true version about the first settlers of the Niamey site, it seems undisputed that the Goudel and Gamkalé people are recognized as the first settlers and original land owners. The *Gunti Yena* gully formed the boundary between the Goudel and the Gamkalé fields and new settlers successively received land on these two territories. Customary land rights thus date back to these land properties and allocations, and refer to the first pioneers who worked the land or allocated it to newcomers. Sidikou (2010: 11) thus suggests that land holdings are an essential reference for locating a family within its community. Identifying and relocating the original land holdings would possibly help trace back the settlement history of Niamey and resolve the first comer dispute. However, these lands are almost entirely occupied by the city today.

### 3. The colonial period: from a small village to the colonial capital

The locality of Niamey as the imprint of the first colonial anchoring in the region was located on the aerated plateau along the Niger River because of its water availability, its gentle breeze and its high ground, which prevented flooding, water stagnation and mosquitoes (Garnier, 2018). It is here that a

<sup>1</sup> The existing literature on the origins and beginnings of Niamey is very sparse. A major source are the recounts of Boubou Hama (1955), Niger's first teacher, historian and politician since the first hour of independence, who collected and commented on texts by colonial administrators on Niamey, and who subsequently provided his own analysis. It is also worth mentioning the work of

Suzanne Bernus (1969), a French ethnologist, on the ethnic particularities of Niamey, which also contains an extensive bibliography of original texts, and the works of Arouna Hamidou Sidikou, university professor and grey eminence of the socio-urban study of the Nigerien capital (1980). For general context of French colonial urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa, see Poinot et al. 1984.

French military post was initially installed during the colonial conquest of the sub-region, and that gave rise to today's national capital of more than 1.5 million inhabitants.

### 3.1. Military conquest and territorial improvisation (1901-1926)

Towards the second half of the 19th century, European travellers and military missions multiplied in the region. The illustrious German explorer Henry Barth was one of the first Europeans to visit the area (Spittler, 2006).<sup>2</sup> After the Berlin conference, European rival powers established in 1890 the rules for taking possession of land in the interior of the continent. The empty spaces on the map had to be conquered and marks had to be put on the ground. It's the competition of the fastest:

*The missions from Sudan [today Mali] were followed in 1895 by those from Dahomey [today Benin], trying to gain speed with the British from Nigeria and the Germans from Togo. In the same year, 1895, Baud and Vergoz explored the Bariba country as far as Say. Decoeur visits the Gurma country and signs a treaty with its chief. Toutée moved up Niger river from Badjibo to Tibifarka between Sinder and Dunzu. It was on his way back that he met the Von Carnap mission from Togo in Kirtachi.*

Sellier (n.d.), French colonial administrator, quoted by Boubou Hama (1955: 32, author's translation)

The French were finally forced to leave the Sokoto Caliphate to the British, but were pleased to have cut off their passage north to the Sahara (ibid. 33). Their objective being a continuous territory from West to East of the continent, from Dakar to Djibouti, while the British aspired to a territory under their control that would join the North and South, from Cairo to Cape Town.

According to the historian Fuglestad (1975: 210-211), the endless wars and attacks between local

population groups during the 19th century had left the Nigerien West in a state of extreme exhaustion (see also Olivier de Sardan, 1984), which largely explains why the French conquest was relatively easy. Thus, the arrival of the French coincided with a deep crisis in local society. They were therefore considered by some as yet another invader, and by others as potential allies against their enemies. This ambiguous situation has made it possible to sign numerous treaties of dependence or protection between local chiefs and European conquerors (Poinsot et al., 1984).

In their travel accounts, some of these military missions mention localities along the Niger River: Sinder, Karma, Say, among others. On the other hand, the village of Niamey was only mentioned for the first time in 1897 by the Hourst mission which went downstream from Timbuktu, and the infamous Voulet-Chanoine mission, on its way to Zinder (1899), the last one for having totally burned down the villages as a reprisal for the hostile reception reserved for Europeans (Sidikou, 2010: 11). The many changes in the location of French military posts, circle or cantonal capitals during these early years of colonial conquest resemble to a trial-and-error strategy of a colonial power, seeking to establish itself in a region that is little known and rather suspicious of its hold and testifies to improvisations and hesitations.

The French arrived in Niger in 1891 through the historic town of Say which is located on the river banks, about twenty kilometres downstream of the current site of Niamey. At the time, Say was an important locality in the area, a site of an influential pre-colonial chieftaincy and centre of religious instruction. When the Monteil mission reached the town, a protectorate treaty was concluded with the traditional chief of Say (Gado, 1997: 66). He would have advised the French to move, not without irony, to *Yama Gungu* Island, a river island that lies today in the heart of Niamey, - but that is flooded during the rainy season and is invaded by mosquitoes -, considering that the banks were already populated by villagers. It is since then that the installation of European settlers began in Niger. However, the colonial settlement was finally carried out on the left bank of the river, on an uninhabited terrace above the

(today Benin) until reaching Niger River, 1897 - Hourst mission (French) travels down Niger River from Timbuktu, 1899 - Voulet-Chanoine mission (French) on its way to Zinder, finally 1901 - the Lenfant Mission (French) preparing the settlement of Europeans on the Niamey site (Bernus, 1969, Djibo, 2003, Poinsot et al., 1984, Sidikou, 2010, Zimmermann, 1901).

<sup>2</sup> European passages in the Niamey region in the 19th century: 1805 - Mungo Park (Scot) paddles downstream from Timbuktu to North-western Nigeria, 1850 - Henri Barth (German) crosses the area from Sokoto to Timbuktu and back, 1890/91 - the Monteil Mission (French) travels from Saint-Louis in Senegal to Tripoli via Chad, 1896 - Commander Toutée (French) travels up from Dahomey

river where the Terminus district of the capital is now located.

It was Captain Salaman, in charge of organizing the Niger-Chad road, who set up a first military post at the Niamey site in 1901 (Motcho, 2010: 16) and then transformed it into the chief place of the Niamey circle in 1903. This was the beginning of the creation of the future capital of the colony of Niger, the last conquered territory in French West Africa (*Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF)), since the French colonization of West Africa took place from West to East. In 1905, the Governor of French West Africa who resided in Dakar, the capital of the AOF, created by decree the Third Military Territory of Niger. This included the vast area between Timbuktu and Lake Chad and was the result of several redivisions and redevelopments of the conquered land. The definition of the capital of this third territory raised debate among the colonial administrators and the installation of the capital in Niamey was only temporary, which is why its urban development remained minimal during the first years. The polynuclear village of Niamey at that time, to which several districts have been added in the meantime, had some 1800 inhabitants. Captain Salaman was appreciated by the people of Niamey and marked the memory of the Niamey people for his desire «to build a city and develop a country instead of waging war» (Gado, 1997: 22). He also paid a rent to the owner of the house he was living in during the first years of his stay on site. That is why the Niamese say "*Niamey, garin captin Salma*" in Hausa, Niamey, Captain Salaman's city. During his term as administrator, the city of Niamey developed into a rudimentary administrative centre, mainly located on the eastern plateau (now the Terminus district) where the governorate headquarters, the post office, the treasury and the telegraph were built. In order to give Niamey more importance than other towns in the neighbouring area such as Say, N'Dounga, Goudel, Karma and Boubon, its first builder introduced incentives to attract people. On the one hand, he decided that every inhabitant of Niamey would not pay taxes and would not be subjected to forced labour by the colonial administration, a decision that would remain in force until 1917. On the other hand, with the agreement of the people of Kalley, who now owned a lot of land, free plots were being distributed to newcomers. Finally, he set up a large livestock market in 'his' city and ensured that markets in neighbouring localities remained uncompetitive due to the high taxation put on their goods (Gado, 1997:

24). As a result of these measures, the town grew to about 3000 people by 1911, a temporary maximum level that would decline in the following years.

Military administrators were often replaced and the development strategy for the territory changed with each new Lieutenant Colonel. Between 1911 and 1926, the capital of the Niger Military Territory was dislodged in Zinder (Kailou Djibo, 2019). With the new military successes in the East and North, this former pre-colonial city, a prestigious seat of the Sultanate, seemed to better justify the establishment of colonial power (Gado, 1997: 25). But improvisation made its way. Sidikou (2010) points out that the frequency of replacements of territorial officials far into the period of Niger colony, was also due to its lack of attractiveness to colonial agents, its remoteness from the AOF capital and its supply routes, and the climatic conditions considered extremely harsh by the colonial agents. In addition, inconvenient or rebel agents were preferably appointed to these remote Nigerien posts, perceived as a prison colony (Fuglestad, 1983) and whose infrastructure development was obviously not a priority for France.

But the Zinder site as capital of the colony increasingly raised discomfort to the colonial rulers about economic dependence on Nigeria, the neighbouring colony of the competing British, and the limited water availability added another struggle to the city's development. From 1920 and after a new territorial redistribution, the territory was considered pacified and Niger became a Civil Territory, governed by civilian instead of military administrators (Fuglestad, 1973a). The creation of the Colony of Niger, an autonomous territory whose boundaries would no longer be modified from that date on, took place two years later, in 1922, and Jules Brévié became its first governor. According to Fuglestad (1983: 119ff), it was from this date that the classical period of French colonial rule in Niger really began, and which was not curbed until the mid-1940s after the Second World War.

Brévié was the first administrator to seriously consider a long-term development strategy for Niger. Alarmed by the cruel lack of local executives and the low level of development of the territory, this proactive governor took a series of pragmatic decisions (Sidikou, 2010: 15, Gado, 1997: 29-30). Above all, it was his decision of transferring the capital back to Niamey that remained engraved in the country's history. This transfer became effective from 1926 and from this date on, the systematic urban



development of Niamey resumed its take-off. The minimal infrastructure of the early years of French military presence had sunk into decline during the First World War and everything had to be taken over. The first large public buildings, such as the Governor's Palace in 1925 (now the Presidency) and a series of buildings designed to house technical and administrative services, were immediately built on the western plateau.

### 3.2. Urban planning and land management (1930-1958)

The early development of the colonial capital in the 1930s was difficult, everything had to be created from the ground. Temporary facilities for European and local staff, their food supply from outside or on site, administrative infrastructure and the first trading houses (import-export) were the main concerns of this period (Sidikou, 1980: 48).

#### 3.2.1. Spatial organization: urban planning and infrastructure

Another concern of the new governor was the sanitation of the city to eradicate unhealthy ponds and stagnant water as breeding grounds for malaria transmitting mosquito larvae (Motcho, 2010: 18). The 1930s marked a decisive turning point in the city's urban planning. Basic development plans were developed on the basis of health principles, but they also required the relocation of traditional districts still located on the river bank. Despite the construction of a first market on the plateau (*Petit Marché*, 1929) to encourage people to move, the inhabitants were reluctant to leave the banks of the river (Issaka, 2010: 71). Following a fire that ravaged many of these straw huts in 1935, the colonial administration imposed a relocation and restructuring of the populations. The inhabitants were then forced to settle on the plateau, set back from the river, and had to build in mudbricks (*banco*). Only Gaweye, the fishing village, was tolerated on its original location near the river. Plots were again distributed free of charge and the new districts that were developing integrated an ethnic mix (Sidikou, 1980: 52) (Map 2).

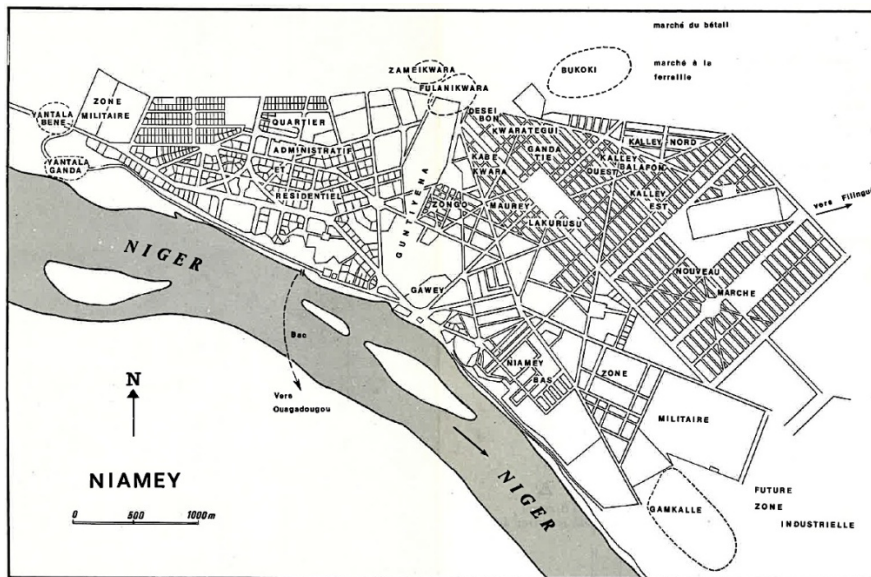
These new inhabited and restructured spaces justified more systematic planning and development. The 1937 urban plan provided for a spatial organization in three differentiated areas of use: (1) the "European city", especially administrative and residential, (2) the "indigenous city", with the restructured districts on the plateau, and (3) the commercial and industrial

zone (tannery, building materials production), near the river. This spatial separation of the city into three zones reflects the French conception of urban public space, also applied in European cities, which divides space into separate and hierarchical function zones. The cadastre also made it possible to better control populations and to set up a sanitary system that evacuated wastewater or rainwater to reduce the risk of epidemics (Motcho, 2010: 18, see Njoh, 2013, Njoh & Akiwumi, 2011). The *Gunti Yena* gully was designed as a hygienist cordon, separating the European from the African spheres. Its indication as "isolation zone" on the urban map tells a lot about the urban principles of the time. Nevertheless, the major public infrastructures and developments planned on this plan (railway station, green belt made of palm trees, etc.) were slow to be put in place (and were eventually abandoned) since the advent of the Second World War slowed down the development of the colony due to the absence of colonial agents who were sent on European fronts to fight.

#### 3.2.2. Socio-political organization: from chieftaincy to political parties

A first attempt to establish a colonial chieftaincy in Niamey took place at the dawning of the colonial presence in Niger. As early as 1903, the colonial power, faced with the complexity of the social structures on-site, artificially grouped the entire western region of the territory into a vast canton, the canton of Niamey. This colonial construction subordinated traditional chieftaincy towns, such as Karma, a Songhay nobility site, but also N'Dounga, Liboré, Saga, Goudel and Hamdalaye (Sidikou, 1980: 19). But the new canton chief of Niamey was a former guide of the infamous Voulet-Chanoine mission and collaborator of the French. He enjoyed no local legitimacy, which is why he was strongly contested by local chiefs and the population (Fuglestad, 1983: 68, Körling, 2011: 120). Due to these difficulties and sources of quarrels, the French administration suspended customary chieftaincy in Niamey between 1921 and 1931. However, following a severe famine (1929/1930), a large influx of rural populations to the capital led to the expansion of the city, which became more multi-ethnic and complicated to manage. In 1931, the colonial power then decided to thank Captain Salaman's former 'boy' for his services to the French cause, and appointed him first chief of Niamey (Bernus, 1969: 22, Sidikou, 1980: 50). However, chieftaincy lacked again any legitimacy and local authority and remained limited to an annexe function

of the colonial administration, ensuring the collection of the head tax among the population (Bernus, 1969: 22).



Map 2: Niamey and its districts in the first years of independence (Bernus, 1969: appendix)

Apart from the drought periods that regularly mark the country's history, the influx of rural migrants to the city was strictly regulated and controlled under colonization by two measures: forced labour and taxes imposed on newcomers to the city. These two measures that were earlier in the city's history used to promote its demographic growth, were now used to slow it down. The public works for the construction of the airfield, the central hospital and maternity ward in the 1940s were largely carried out thanks to this free labour. When forced labour was finally abolished in 1946, more and more rural people came to settle in the city (Sidikou, 1980: 54). Forced labour was justified by the *indigénat* status (nativeness), which downgraded the local population of the French colonies into *subjects*, opposed to *citizens* who referred to Europeans and a black minority, known as the *évolués* (see Mamdani, 1996). This distinction between citizens and subjects also marked the colonial urban policy that regulated access to the city, by allowing the former to acquire land plots to the detriment of the latter (see Eckert (2007) for Douala in Cameroon, and Piermay (1993 and 2003) for cities in Central Africa). Thus, these social categories served as instruments for controlling urban development.

After the Second World War, the *indigénat* status in the colonies was abolished in the French constitution and the colonies became overseas territories,

politically more autonomous. From 1946 onwards, this opened the possibility to the creation of political parties, freedom of association and expression in Niger and French-speaking West Africa more generally. Seats were reserved in French parliamentary assemblies for political representation of these overseas territories (Fuglestad, 1973b: 314). Hamani Diori was elected the first Nigerien deputy in France. At the same time, resistance against colonial rule in Niger (and elsewhere in the AOF) began to be organized and the process towards decolonization got underway (Djibo, 2003: 41). A large number of Nigerien political parties were created and Niamey played an important role in the formation of these groups, as it was the control of the cities that political parties were targeting by securing the support of district chiefs (Sidikou, 1980: 53-54). Almost everywhere in French-speaking West Africa, the formation of left-wing socialist and communist parties, such as the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA), were grouping around a radical policy against administrative chiefs and the colonial administration (Fuglestad, 1973b: 314). In Niger however, the supporters of the PPN-RDA (*Parti Progressiste Nigérien - Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*) didn't have an easy part, because of the dependence of their militants on the colonial system and the important weight of chieftaincy in society, - and despite their pivotal figure Djibo Bakary (see de



Benoiste, 1990, Djibo, 2003, Fuglestad, 1973b and 1983, van Walraven, 2009, 2013, 2017). Harassments around the creation of political parties were profoundly disrupting urban life and sowing discord between populations. Niamey's administrative chief *Amirou Kallé* was dismissed from office for joining the French Communist Party. The colonial administration sought to calm things down and regain control. An administrative reorganisation of the city included the villages of Gamkalé and Yantala under the central administration of the *Ville de Niamey* who was once again managed by a French commander on whom the district chiefs, all equal among them, depended (Sidikou, 1980: 54).

### 3.2.3. The turn of the 1950s: urbanization and land market

In the early 1950s, Niamey had about 12,000 inhabitants and became the first urban centre in Niger. As a capital, it hosted centralised services and welcomed foreign civil servants, Europeans or from other AOF colonies, traders and Nigerien employees, the latter offering an urban anchorage to their rural parents. The new urban plan (*Plan Herbé*) of 1952 provided for different functional areas: administrative, commercial, industrial, industrial, military, residential and green spaces (Motcho, 2010: 19). Motcho (ibid.) pointed out that the plan of the 'indigenous city' was different from that of the 'European city', which was more aerated and wooded while the other was composed of tiny orthogonal street grids enclosing squares and subdivided into plots recalling the layout of military camps.

With this prospective planning, parcelling (*lotissement*) as the procedure of producing formal urban plots through the parcelling of rural land, became systematic. This was also when the urban plot (*parcelle*) acquired a market value. In the 1950s, a plot of 600m<sup>2</sup> was sold at between 6,000 - 30,000 FCFA, prices that would increase dramatically in the following decades (1979: 120,000 FCFA, 1989: 600,000 FCFA) (Motcho, 2010: 19) and which no longer have anything to do with the prices paid today (several tens of millions of FCFA in the city centre). At that time, the purchasers of land plots were mainly civil servants or veterans who enjoyed a regular salary. With this land market being set up, land speculation emerged and intensified with the sale of customary land by traditional rights holders (inhabitants of the urbanised villages of Goudel, Yantala, Gamkalé, Kalley, etc.) (ibid.) (see also Bertrand, 1994: 265ff for Bamako). Land parcelling

has the advantage of guaranteeing formal title deeds, but at the same time obliges the owner to develop it within a few years while respecting the building legislation in force (Motcho, 2010: 20).

The modest (because strictly controlled) urban growth during the colonial area allowed the implementation of urban plans within foreseen limits. Towards the end of the 1950s however, things began to accelerate, both in terms of urban development and policy. From the mid of the decade onwards, an urbanization process took off in the capital (Sidikou, 1980: 55). The *Plateau* and *Terminus* districts of the European city, as well as the African districts around the *Grand Marché* (Gandatié, Kwara Tégui, Kabé Kwara) and the Kalley Amirou, Kalley-Est and Kalley Balafon districts were developed during these years. Nevertheless, the *Plan Hebré* in 1952, the last urban plan under colonization, no longer managed to keep pace with the proliferation of new neighbourhoods that were multiplying, also due to a new famine in 1954 that caused an influx of impoverished rural migrants seeking support in the city (Issaka, 2010: 73-74).

Politically, Niamey evolved in that same year from an indigenous municipality (*commune indigène*) to a mixed municipality (*commune mixte*), administered by a municipal commission of eight full members and four alternate members (Sidikou, 1980: 55). A year later, the city was established as a full-fledged municipality (*commune en pleine exercice*) and the following year, in 1956, the first municipal elections were held, in which Djibo Bakary was elected first mayor of Niamey. His deputy became Boubou Hama, another illustrious figure in the country's political history. But the new mayor aspired for more than managing the capital, he strived to lead his country towards political independence. With his political party Sawaba, also created in 1956 in the wake of political upheavals, he campaigned for immediate independence in the famous 1958 referendum (van Walraven, 2017). However, immediate independence would be rejected by French interference (see de Benoiste, 1990, van Walraven, 2009 and 2013); Guinea was the only country of the AOF to achieve immediate independence by vote. All the other French colonies in the sub-region, including Niger, only achieve full independence two years later, in 1960. Hamani Diori, an ally of France, became the first president of independent Niger and banned the Sawaba party. Djibo Bakary fled into exile and Boubou Hama was established as first president of the National Assembly.

#### 4. The post-colonial period: urban sprawl and the challenge of its control

It is easy to see the decolonization and independence of formerly colonized countries as a major rupture in the political history of these nations. Certainly, this turning point is important and has left its mark on people's minds as well as on individual and collective history. It has raised hopes for the establishment of autonomous management of the country, free from external, imposed and unequal domination. However, the rupture was in reality not as fundamental. Several authors have put forward a hypothesis of continuity, which would suggest that there is no fundamental shift between the colonial and postcolonial period. This continuity is confirmed in many studies on public management, institutions and State characteristics in postcolonial contexts (Tidjani Alou, 2009: 38, Njoh, 2006: 556).

##### 4.1. Evictions, resettlements and authoritarian regimes

When Niger finally gained independence on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1960, the urban situation in the capital posed increasing challenges to the authorities of the First Republic. Niamey had about 34,000 inhabitants, but the urban and demographic challenges constantly increased and were far from being managed. During the first decade of independence, urban population development reached a growth rate of about 10% per year and the Niamey population tripled in twelve years from 34,000 to 108,000 inhabitants. This resulted also of a vigorous industrialization policy following the groundnut production boom in the 1960s (Motcho, 2010: 29). According to Hamadou Issaka (2010: 74), it is from this point onwards that urban planning always lagged behind reality (see also Seybou, 1995: 16). In 1964, a new urban plan provided for the development of existing areas. In its conception, it becomes clear that segregationist urban planning was far from being outdated with independence: the size of plots in traditional sectors was more than three times smaller than in residential sectors (200m<sup>2</sup> versus 700m<sup>2</sup>) and the density five times higher (150 versus 30 inhabitants/ha), still surpassed by collective housing (*maison de cour*) sectors, inhabited particularly by newcomers to the city, with up to 225 inhabitants/ha. Yet, this plan was again outdated very quickly and the city dwellers started seeking in their own ways to respond to lacking housing opportunities (ibid.). Talladjé to the East of the city being the first informal settlement,

was built from 1966 onwards and finally formalised by the municipality in 1981 after a long struggle by its inhabitants (Yayé Saidou & Motcho, 2012: 3, see also Körling, 2020a). Urban planning measures of that period nevertheless had the merit of leading to the development of major infrastructures such as the first bridge, the Kennedy Bridge, which, from 1970 on, connected the right bank to the city, thus allowing the urbanization of this sparsely populated area. It accommodated the university campus and other vocational schools on the one hand, old Fulani villages (Lamordé, Nogaré, Kirkisoye) on the other, as well as new districts (e. g. Karadjé and Banga Bana) or old relocated villages such as Gaweye, the fishing village that was to leave its original location on the left bank when a luxury hotel of the same name was built.

The 1970s and 1980s were again marked by a general economic boom, this time generated by the beginning of large-scale uranium mining in the north of the country, which caused a period of architectural grandeur in the capital (Körling, 2011: 78). The additional public revenues were mainly invested in the modernisation of the capital and the few large-scale buildings that shaped for a long time the emblematic skyline of Niamey still bear witness to this. They are however strongly competed since recent years with new buildings, both public and private, which are multiplying rapidly, and with a flyover road at the Kennedy bridge crossing.

The population growth of that period had two main origins: on the one hand, due to the favourable economic situation, the percentage of single people decreased while the fertility rate increased (Motcho, 2010: 30). On the other hand, the two major droughts of 1972/73 and 1983/84 who were devastating for the entire Sahel in many respects, led to unprecedented waves of immigration to the cities and are cited to be decisive for Niamey's macrocephaly, which has since increased. During the first episode, Malian migrants from Kidal, Gao and Menaka also flocked to the Nigerien capital. Many have settled there permanently and the number of inhabitants doubled or tripled in the outlying districts (Gado, 1997: 36). The poor management of the food crisis that followed the first event cost the Hamani Diori regime dearly. It was overthrown by a military coup in 1974.

The territorial and administrative organization of Niamey got modified many times over the following decades, trying to erase the marks of colonial bipartition (see Motcho, 2004, Giraut, 1999: 69 ff.) and letting the capital look like a major construction

site under permanent restructuring. At the same time, allotments (*lotissements*) followed one another and were mainly accessible to the upper social class. The city grew constantly but lacked cruelly of formalised construction land. The military regime of Seyni Kountché, in power since the *coup d'Etat* of 1974, responded to this housing crisis in various ways. The city authority proceeded to evictions and resettlements of peripheral districts, as for example in the case of the Boukoki neighbourhood (« the huts », in Hausa language) or Kwara Tégui (« our new home », in Zarma language), to provide space for new allotments. Districts such as Lazaret or Madina were created during this period (Gado, 1997: 36). But new *lotissements* got occupied before they were serviced, creating more remediation problems. On the other hand, certain economic measures, such as the development of financial services, should facilitate access to credit to promote home ownership. In a context of single party politics of that time, access to urban plots was arguably highly politicized and clientelism proliferated in a locked framework of political competitions (see also Bertrand, 1994, for the Malian context of the 1980s).

#### 4.2. Repeated administrative restructuring

The decade of the 1990s that followed the natural death of President Seyni Kountché, was marked by major upheavals, instabilities and socio-political divisions, which once again left their mark on the political and institutional landscape of Niger and its capital. After the post-colonial regimes of Hamani Dori and Seyni Kountché, which embodied the harshness and authoritarianism of the single party or military regime systems of the first three decades after independence, several regimes of shorter duration followed from 1987 onwards. Divisions and strong tensions within Nigerien society, combined with external factors, led to the Sovereign National Conference (*Conférence Nationale Souveraine*) in 1991, through which a process of relaxation, opening-up and democratic transition was timidly set in motion. This has not been without difficulties, as evidenced by the frequent and abrupt changes of regimes during these years. Multiparty politics, respect for rule of law, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, alternation, participation and decentralisation were the most important precepts. The date of the National Conference also corresponds to the end of State-centredness (*étatisme*) (Dembélé, 2010) which gave rise to the liberalization of the economy and its domination by the informal sector

(Motcho, 2010: 31). The Structural Adjustment Plans (SAPs), imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions, have led to the disengagement of the State in several central areas such as health, education and infrastructure. The withdrawal of the State from these areas, but also the devaluation of the franc CFA in 1994, resulted in the impoverishment of large parts of the rural and urban masses and the decline of public services. The 1990s are therefore an important turning point in Niger's political and economic history. Nevertheless, political stability came back only gradually and it was not until the 2000s for the country to recover from these turbulent years.

For the administrative organisation of Niamey, the decade of the 1990s was equally decisive. Population growth made it necessary to divide the city into more manageable entities, which was immediately followed by the question of the political autonomy of these entities. The 1984 Master Plan for Urban Planning and Development (*Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme*, SDAU) aimed to direct urban development for the coming years and was part of a generalized attempt at urban planning in African capitals (Seybou, 1995: 37ff, see Chenal, 2009). This plan provided for the division of the city into five districts, administered by district heads who assist a Prefect Mayor (Motcho, 2004: 112). Five years later, in 1989, there was a new division that provided for three municipalities, a regrouping of the five previous ones, which together would form the Urban Community of Niamey (*Communauté Urbaine de Niamey*, CUN). The continuation of the capital's spatial and social organization in the 1990s was obviously marked by political and institutional changes, including the advent of decentralization, which also applied to urban management. As a result of these events, population growth slowed slightly. For the first time since independence, the annual growth rate fell below the 5% threshold (Motcho, 2010: 32). In 1996, five municipalities were again chosen, a proposal that was part of a more global process of municipalization throughout Niger, for the implementation of decentralization (see Giraut, 1999: 69ff). Niamey became one of the eight regions of Niger. In this new administrative configuration of Niamey, the Prefect remains the key figure, the appointed mayors are only executors (Motcho, 2010: 23). But this division had many shortcomings from the outset: for example, conflicts of competence between the local levels of municipalities and the CUN, which remained central in the management of finances and services, and conflicts related to the different

economic and tax opportunities between municipalities. The question of the perimeter revealed crucial in the administrative division since it stated on the possibility (or not) of the future spatial extension of a municipality, and even more importantly, on the opportunity for municipalities to invest in the sale of land and thus generate financial resources. The 1996 proposal provided for the reduction of the perimeter of the existing urban area and would have had the advantage of allowing local authorities to concentrate on the management of the existing city instead of engaging into plot sale affairs to fund their budget (Giraut, 1999: 70). Still, it was decided otherwise. In 2002, at the discretion of the population, yet another division was adopted: it again provided for five municipalities, each of them with a possible extension perimeter towards the urban outskirts that allowed the subdivision and sale of plots by these municipalities. Another important aspect: the new division traced for the first time the original boundaries of the history of the settlement of the Niamey site, a phenomenon that Frédéric Giraut (1999) has called the 'return of the repressed' (*le retour du refoulement*) and which could also be observed at the national level, where the new administrative districts were finally largely based on the traditional entities of the cantons. In Niamey, the four municipalities on the left bank correspond from west to east to the territories of Goudel and Yantala (*Commune I*), then to those of Maouri (*Commune II*), Kallé (*Commune III*) and Gamkalé and Saga (*Commune IV*) (Motcho, 2004: 120-121), the *Gouti Yena* gully marking the boundary between Commune I and II as before between the customary fields of Goudel and Gamkalé. For Commune IV, it includes the entire canton of Saga, including Gamkalé (Giraut, 1999: 70, note 6). Commune V is located on the right bank and represents the lands of the ancient settlements of Fulani herders. Traditional chiefs were the main actors in this new division on the old community lands. They imposed and obtained from the political authority a subdivision taking into account their interests: "Indeed, traditional chiefs hope by this division to have control over future local administrations located on their former lands" (Motcho, 2004: 121, author's translation). This foreshadowed political rivalries in perspective between indigenous (*anguwa*) and non-indigenous (*zongo*) people for the conquest of local power. We will return later in this article to the role of traditional chiefs in the urbanization process in Niamey. For the current breakdown, the limits have been slightly

modified again, but they are still based on the same logic.

In the current configuration, the name of the *arrondissement communal* is more precise than the name of the *commune*. Since June 2011, decentralized urban management has been the subject of an institutional reorganization that has converted from decentralized to recentralized management. The municipalities then became municipal districts. In other words, these decentralized administrative units have become recentralized units, therefore less autonomous and once again under the supervision of the City of Niamey, which now appears as the central urban authority. In everyday language, however, it is always the term "*commune*" that is most often used.

## 5. The current period: democratization and urban land tenure

In the last part of this urban history recount, four aspects are presented that are crucial for the question of access to land and urban land ownership in Niamey: (1) the precariousness and collective housing, (2) the public production of urban land by public housing actors, (3) the housing crisis and access to real estate, and (4) chiefdom and its relationship to land in urbanized areas.

### 5.1. Habitat types and urban precariousness

The 1990s and early 2000s were essentially marked by the change in the role of the central State. The strong and centralized State, with its inflated administration and overvalued budget, had been leading to significant external debt since the 1980s. Niger, like many other countries in the Global South, was put under austerity regime by the Bretton Woods institutions in order to restructure public administration. In order to restore public finances to macroeconomic equilibrium, social spending (health, education, social security, infrastructure), among other measures, was drastically reduced during the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Plans (SAPs). The devaluation of the CFA Franc in 1994 also led to an immediate reduction in the purchasing power of Nigerien city dwellers. On the other hand, these macroeconomic consolidation measures resulted in the impoverishment of the population and a decline in its standard of living, especially in urban areas. Rural migrants arrived in the city only through their personal contacts and labour force. Motcho (2005b: 180) refers to a study carried out by the State

of Niger which estimated that in 1993, 42% of the population of Niamey was classified as “poor”. More recent figures suggest a decline in urban poverty in Niamey with a rate of 27.1% of poor households in 2005, 27.8% in 2007/2008 and 10.2% in 2011 (Institut National de la Statistique (INS) 2014: 33).

According to Motcho (2005b), the construction material used is a major marker of the socio-economic stratification of the Niamey population, and thus for the definition of urban poverty (see also Diaz Olvera, Plat & Pochet, 2000 and 2002, UN Habitat, 2007). He differentiated five types of housing that can simultaneously serve as rudimentary categories of living standards for the Niamese population: straw huts (4.5%), mudbrick (*banco*) houses (52.2%), semi-cement houses, i.e. a bricks of a mixture of cement/mud (9.4%), cement houses (14.7%) and villas (19%). Thus, about one and a half decades ago, the vast majority of Niamese people lived in mudbrick houses, which corresponds, according to Henri Motcho, to the large percentage of poor population mentioned above. In the last decade however, the central districts that were traditionally consisting of mudbrick constructions are continuously replaced by multi-storey buildings and transformed from popular neighbourhoods into business districts. On the new outskirts of the city, especially on the northern and western periphery, the dominant housing type is the villa, a single detached house on a plot of land and of a certain standard.

The impoverishment of the urban population in the 1990s inevitably had consequences on life standards in the capital. Formal neighbourhoods became denser and informal and unplanned neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city multiplied, most of them without adequate access to basic public facilities and services (see Bontianti, Hungerford, Younsa & Noma, 2014). Henri Motcho (2010: 22) cites several reasons for these informal settlements: a chronic shortage of formal housing, different regulations that govern and complicate access to land, tax enforcement, insufficient supply of plots and high prices, as well as various land speculation strategies (Körling, 2020a). However, it was not only the informal districts that contributed to the spatial expansion of the city. Motcho (2010: 21, author’s translation) also points out that “the first concern of every Niamey inhabitant is to have his own home, a safe environment and at the same time a proof of social success and urban integration” (see Hilgers, 2008 and Zuppinger, 2005 for Burkina Faso). The status of long-term tenant is not socially valued, which leads urban dwellers to

seek to build their own homes and fuels the demand for plots (Adamou, 2012).

In between the two extremes of *banco* shacks and Western-style villa however, the shared compound housing (*maison de cour*), built mostly in semi- or full-cement, is still an important feature of modest housing in Niamey. This type of construction is prevalent in popular neighbourhoods, whether well-off or informal, and is mainly inhabited by tenants. This collective housing is built on a rectangular plot plan that follows the same structure: a wall surrounds the compound, then several entities, usually with one or two rooms, are built inside the same courtyard that the inhabitants share, as well as the same basic sanitary facilities. If the owner lives there himself, he usually occupies the three-room unit (two bedrooms/parlour). The two-room dwellings, the famous *célibaterium* (one bedroom/parlour), rarely inhabited by single persons, but rather by entire families, and the *entrée-couchée* (one room only) are rented out.

Although these shared compounds may also be located in regulated areas, the space available per unit is often very limited and their inhabitants suffer from limited access to water points, sanitation facilities and electricity connections (Motcho, 2005b). The valuation of a plot in the form of a courtyard house is nevertheless particularly interesting for a private individual, since it allows to take maximum advantage of the rents for a very limited space, and with a modest investment in building materials and standard. Motcho (2005b: 181) considers that courtyard housing is a godsend for owners who build up to 10 units on a 600m<sup>2</sup> plot. With rents ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 CFA francs for mudbrick houses, 10,000 to 15,000 CFA francs for semi-hard, and 15,000 to 25,000 CFA francs for hard/cement, the owner can earn up to 200,000 CFA francs per month, which can be more profitable than renting a villa. It should be noted that these figures have now increased by at least 15 to 20% (see Adamou, 2012). In the context of a city where access to real estate ownership is aspired for, but requires hard struggling, rental courtyard housing meets a significant demand for accessible housing for poor and modest social strata. This type of housing is still most widespread, also in other cities of the sub-region (see Bertrand (1999) for Bamako, Choplin (2006) and Choplin & Ciavolella (2008) for Nouakchott, Zuppinger (2005) for Ouagadougou).

## 5.2. Public housing and production of urban plots

The parcelling of peri-urban land by the State, and since recent years even more so by private developers, is the subject of all conversations in Niamey but relatively little research is focusing so far on the phenomena.<sup>3</sup> Parcelling (*lotissement*) is by definition the procedure that transforms rural land into urban land to create plots for housing, industrial or commercial activities and public facilities (*ibid.*). The standard size of housing plots in public zoning is at about 300 - 400m<sup>2</sup> and may go up to 600m<sup>2</sup> in private zoning areas. Indeed, this is a procedure that concerns above all the land on the city's fringes and prepares for future urban expansion. As a result, the eyes of city dwellers aspiring to their own homes are obviously turned towards parcelling, even if few of them are able to access a parcel of land, or only after many years of personal savings and hassles. In short, before, when the State was the only developer, there were too few parcels of land allotted. Today, where they are produced in large quantities by private developers, they are either too expensive or too distant from the city-centre where they remain uninhabitable for long due to a lack of connection to the water and electricity networks (Körling, 2020b, Körling & Hassane, 2019). Indeed, since the colonial period, land parcelling has remained the key instrument for regulating the spatial development of cities in French-speaking West Africa and the most important planning and urban development instrument (Njoh, 2006: 549, Hilgers, 2008: 216-217). As mentioned above, at certain periods in the history of Niamey, plots were distributed free of charge to attract inhabitants, at other times their access was reduced to a minimum by strict regulations to prevent certain population strata from settling in the city. Until the mid-1990s, the State and its branches, like the CUN, represented the only developer, with implementation sometimes delegated to public urban planning companies (see below) (Issaka, 2013). This is once again in line with the concept of a strong central State that concentrates the main decision-making power within it. Parcelling as a key instrument of urban planning was directly associated with this State of which it was the extension of the arm (Njoh, 2009, see also Dembélé, 2010, Körling, 2020a, Myers, 2008, Scott, 1998).

With the indebtedness of the post-colonial State and the restructuring imposed to restore public finances in the 1990s, public housing development by the State has nevertheless undergone a design change that has had major consequences on urban development in Niger, and particularly in Niamey. The parcel of land has become above all a generator of public revenue for an urban administration in need of resources. Indeed, the acceleration of urban expansion as it was observed again towards the end of the millennium was largely due to the generation of parcels of land divided to provide the State with income. On the one hand, the Urban Community of Niamey (*Communauté Urbaine de Niamey, CUN*), due to its inability to generate its own resources, proceeded with massive parcelling between 1994 and 2005 and sold more than 55,000 plots to pay the salaries of its agents and operate its services. On the other hand, to directly satisfy its civil servants whose salaries were continuously paid late, about 400 ha (equal at more than 13'000 plots) were parcelled out as compensation (Motcho, 2010: 32). Many of these plots, which were not immediately developed, remained empty or only occupied by a small brick house or hut to meet the requirements of the law to develop it within five years (Motcho & Adamou, 2014). It is estimated that at least 100,000 parcels are empty and not valued in Niamey. These operations of paying delayed wages with urban plots led to an overproduction of plots of land that their owners were slow to develop because they were far from the city centre and outside the perimeter of other serviced allotments (Issaka, 2007, Seybou, 2005). Indeed, in the absence of other investment opportunities in a country with a poorly diversified economy, the anticipated value of the land encouraged many actors, both public and private, to invest or simply deposit their money in the capital's land or real estate to create post-SAP prosperity.

These peripheral areas are now characterized by discontinuous building and relatively low population densities (Adamou, 2012). Nevertheless, some properties have been developed without connection to water or electricity networks, with residents managing with a private fountain and a generator if they can afford it. Living in these areas represents a

<sup>3</sup> While numerous studies mention the phenomenon of land parcelling for its inevitable nature in urban studies (for Niamey: Diaz Olvera et al. (2000, 2002), Körling (2011, 2013), Motcho (2005a) and Njoh (2006), for Nouakchott: Choplin (2006), for Dakar: Diop (2012), for Central African Republic: Piermay (1986a) and for Ouagadougou: Zuppinger

(2005)), it was paradoxically for a long time rarely the subject of explicit analyses. More recent studies include: Bertrand (2019, 2021), Camara (2021), Gensler (2002), Hilgers (2005, 2008), Issaka (2013), Issaka & Boureima Kandegomni (2021), Körling & Hassane (2019), and Meyer (2018).



serious handicap due to the lack of access to basic infrastructure, the distance from public services (markets, hospitals, schools), the workplace or income-generating activities, which weighs heavily on the family budgets of poor households (Diaz Olvera et al., 2002, see Ravalet & Vincent-Geslin, 2015, Yayé Saidou & Motcho, 2012). Paradoxically, high living density in localized family concessions is not excluded, due to the cohabitation of several households in a single courtyard (Adamou, 2012). For such a plot in the new allotments to be properly serviced and connected to the public networks, it is often necessary to wait about ten years, too long for the majority of owners to endure the hardship and additional costs and who are therefore unable to enjoy their property.

Despite all these disadvantages, building and living on a formalized parcel of land is an important symbolic asset. Mattieu Hilgers (2008) has shown that in Burkinabe cities, access to a parcel of land represents access to a modern space that stands in opposition to customary spaces, and that symbolizes for citizens the equivalent of accessing a modern urban identity. Since colonization, the parcelling produced by the administration were reserved for civil servants and had the best equipment in basic service. "Thus, parcelling has gradually imposed itself on the minds of local populations as a necessary condition for development" (Hilgers, 2008: 217, author's translation) and to be able to access an urban character and a higher level of civilization and development (see also Poinot et al., 1984). Motcho and Adamou (2014: 212-213) confirm this analysis for Niamey and refer to "the myth of the *cités*" or programmed housing which, in their words, is "discriminatory and segregationist" in that such operations involve beneficiaries from the same social category, State or private sector employees, to the detriment of poor households, and prevents social mixing in these districts (ibid. 213) (see also Adamou, 2012).

In Niger, since 1997 and following a reform of land laws in the context of the liberalization and privatization of State structures, private developers have been legally introduced into urban land production (Issaka, 2013: 3). Since then, the scale of land production in Niger's cities has taken on a whole new dimension, which, paradoxically, has not solved the housing crisis that persists for the vast majority of the low-income population.

### 5.3. Housing crisis and access to construction land

As mentioned above, the acquisition of a plot of land and the construction of one's own home is a major concern for Niamese city dwellers. However, the persistence of the housing crisis and the difficulty of accessing a plot of land make it very difficult for many urban dwellers to achieve this aspiration. With regard to access to housing, there is a clear gap between the wealthier social strata and the vast majority of the lower middle class and poor households. I will focus only briefly on the difficulties and tricks faced by poor households in accessing urban land and building houses. The objective of this study not being, for once, the analysis of the informal districts that are usually the subject of recurrent studies (see Körling, 2011, 2020a and 2020b, Nkurunziza, 2007, Toulmin, 2008). Jean-Luc Piermay (2003: 41, author's translation) had described the fighter's path for the inhabitants of Central African cities, but this is also and always valid for the vast majority of low-income city dwellers in Niger.

*The newcomer to the city, first housed by a member of his family, quickly becomes a tenant in one of the pericentral districts that shelter the highest densities in the city. If the torments of the life of a tenant quickly make him want to become a homeowner, he still has to become a real city dweller, a good connoisseur of the city's traps and tricks. It often takes ten years to do so.*

The high cost of a parcel of land makes it difficult to acquire formalized land and more often than not, the alternative is an arrangement with a traditional chief of customary property land. Hybrid ways of accessing the plot through this means a procedure that combines formal aspects with those of the customary world. Then comes the construction of the house, most often by self-promotion, i.e., step by step, according to the means at disposal and by developing the plot gradually in terms of the equipment used: often first in rammed earth and later in final materials, and in the number of parts built (Motcho, 2005b: 184). This is a long-term undertaking that still entails another ten years and requires "an impressive amount of energy and cunning to achieve what will remain the work of life" (Piermay, 2003: 42, author's translation).

In response to these difficulties of access to housing in Niamey, the Nigerien State has implemented various measures to try to respond to a constant housing crisis. But these measures were aimed above all at the upper social strata and did nothing to solve

the difficulties of low-income households (Issaka, 2013: 2, Motcho & Adamou, 2014). Attempts by the State to promote so-called "social housing" in the post-colonial years have proved episodic in terms of numbers and have had no effect on the majority of the population. Recently, however, the front lines in real estate have begun to move for the upper social classes, but gradually also for the middle class. Fuelled by the mining industry and, above all, by oil extraction since 2012, the demand for urban housing and other infrastructure in cities has generated a development of financial services that has continued to grow since then. Niger has seen the establishment of new commercial banks and an increase in the number of branches, the majority of which are located in the capital and belong to the four major commercial banks (Sonibank, BIA, Ecobank and Bank of Africa). In a report published for Housing Finance Africa, Shakrah Sadou (2012) analyses the new opportunities for access to housing finance offered by these banks that offer medium-term loans, often used for housing finance.

As a result of the economic boom, property prices for developed areas have risen steadily in recent years. Apart from a few rare foreign investors so far, it is largely wealthy and/or diaspora Nigerien citizens who are buying properties and investing massively in the modernisation of residential and commercial real estate in the capital and other cities of the country (Sadou, 2012, see also Biehler, Choplin & Morelle, 2015). The reasons should be sought in the increase in demand for natural resources (oil, uranium, gold, among others), but also in the current President's ambitious project called *Niamey Nyala*, a programme to transform Niamey into a modern and beautiful city. Currently, the financial sector has about ten commercial banks, an agricultural bank (BAGRI) and a housing bank, the latter created only in 2011, which will promote access to credit financing (Sadou, 2012). *Banque de l'Habitat* replaces *Crédit du Niger*, a public financial institution created in 1958, but finally liquidated in 1999 due to lack of profitability and poor management (Motcho & Adamou, 2014: 202-203, see also Poinot et al., 1984). Until now, the Government of Niger has provided its civil servants with State-subsidised housing and house financing through *Crédit du Niger* and the *Société Nationale d'Urbanisme et de Construction Immobilière* (SONUCI), a public company for housing development, also created in 1962 (Sadou, 2012, Motcho & Adamou, 2014: 203). This policy favoured above all State employees, which "in reality reveals

the permanent will of the State to support its civil servants in order to consolidate its political power" (Motcho & Adamou, 2014: 203, author's translation).

It is in recent years that new formulas have begun to gain momentum in the way housing is financed, namely, the partnership between real estate companies, real estate developers and social organisations to promote the construction of individual houses (Issaka, 2013). In 2011, Ecobank and the National Trade Union of Teachers of Niger (*Syndicat National des Enseignants du Niger, SNEN*), for example, agreed on a partnership to finance a programme of social housing at affordable prices for teachers throughout the country, a body of civil servants known to be among the lowest incomes in the country. This initiative has had a positive impact in Niger and currently other unions have developed similar projects with private sector banks (Sadou, 2012). In 2012, for example, SONUCI developed a strategic partnership with certain real estate developers to build 2,000 houses (ibid.). The arrangement foresees that the bank provides a guarantee to the real estate developer who provides a large quantity of turn-key homes, on the one hand, and enters into a contract with salaried members of a union, company or other organization for repayment by individuals over the next 15 or 20 years, on the other hand (Körling & Hassane, 2019).

Sadou (2012) points out however, that such forms of financing are still in the embryonic stage because of the low income of wage earners in Niger and the very small number of people in paid employment. Indeed, the vast majority of Nigerien urban dwellers are forced to resort to other forms of housing finance, especially personal savings, what other authors have called "self-promotion" and "self-construction", as well as remittances from the diaspora and family assistance resources (see Motcho, 2005b, Motcho & Adamou, 2014, Piermay, 2003).

These are the reasons why access to housing finance through this formula is extremely low in Niger, and why the interest rate and the duration of the loan considerably increase the cost of borrowing (Sadou, 2012). As a result, the majority of the population cannot afford housing through this means. In the current programmes for credit homes, Sadou mentions that the smallest available house costs 6 500 000 FCFA (about 10 000 €), at an interest rate of 10.5% and repayable over 20 years, thus a monthly repayment of about 30 000 FCFA. However, the percentage of the population that can access such a

mortgage is low. About 85% of the country's population earns less than FCFA 30 000 per month. Shakrah Sadou (2012) therefore estimates that only 22% of salaried workers (less than 1% of the total population) have access to this type of financing, specifically senior managers in the public and private sectors. As a result, "the majority of the population in urban areas rent their houses. Less than 0.1% of the population has access to State-subsidised housing, because only salaried workers, and in particular State officials, are qualified for subsidised houses" (Sadou, 2012: n.d., author's translation).

At the legislative level, Niger has also tried to facilitate access to housing and land. In 2006, in the context of a land reform promoted by ECOWAS, a procedure was adopted to facilitate the acquisition of a definitive land title. This *Sheda* title (witness, in Hausa) corresponds to a simplified land title, and attempts to respond to the land insecurity that prevails for the majority of Nigerien urban dwellers, caused by the costly and lengthy procedure required in order to obtain a final title. This procedure is therefore only rarely used by urban landlords (see Rochgude & Plancon, 2009).

### Conclusion: on the depoliticization of the urban space

It is obvious that the use of urban space, its appropriation, distribution and planning through the different periods of the country's political history, are not neutral or subject to purely technical questions. The control of land by population groups, their spatial hold through settlement during the colonial conquest or during the building of a monocephalic capital of the independent country, reflect societal power relations and political priorities, often imposed in a top-down manner, to control a space and govern those who live in it. In contrast, urban planning and urban spatial design is a political and politicised enterprise, in which space, in principle apolitical, is actively politicised, not only in the context of colonial domination, but especially there (cf. Scott, 1998, Njoh, 2006, 2009). Space and its materialized form of land are thus actively politicized and become a mirror of societal power relations (Körling, 2020a). However, this article has shown that urban policy, which sets priorities, makes choices and channels the market, also reads as a reaction to certain economic constraints in a country where few other areas of investment exist. Instead of planned and measured urban planning, the production of plots was often used to provide

investment opportunities for the country's economic and political elites (or beyond), in other words plots as a currency for exchange and investment, but not to guarantee a roof over one's head for everyone. The urban land market was managed as if it were an egalitarian distribution among city dwellers, which in fact amounts to a depoliticization of urban affairs and urban planning, especially, but not exclusively, under and after colonisation.

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