

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Music as Cultural Technologies of Political Mediation in Mali and Niger

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Abstract

Over the past recent decades, the roles of arts and artistic performances have gained a new significance in the scholarship on social movements in Africa. This scholarship scrutinizes the political significance of arts and popular artistic performances to political mediation. Informed by these scholarly works, this article examines the narratives by which the musicians politicize two interrelated *alquitar* musical practices in northern Mali and Niamey, Niger. One sheds light on how the musicians of the music festival known as the *festival du désert* relate this event to the quest of social consensus between ethnic groups in northern Mali. They also situate the festival du désert as a political movement contesting the theocratic project of the Al-Qaida and the Islamic state-affiliated armed groups since 2012. The other *alquitar* practice in focus here addresses the popular performances of the music group *dagh tenere* by which the Tuareg refugees from Mali in Niamey call for intra Tuareg consensus in their regions of origin. An ethnographic analysis of these musical practices as forms of political mediation and social movement, I submit, furthers scholarly understanding of how ordinary people labor to contribute to building social consensus and assert disagreements in one of the world's most conflicted regions today. The result of the analysis affords a non state centric perspective on civil society in Africa.

Keywords: Music; Conflict; Social movement; Mali; Niger

1. Introduction

The article draws on theoretical debates analyzing wars in Africa to contribute to the literature on social movements. Scholars have adopted different perspectives to make sense of the pervasive warscape in Africa (see Spencer, 1965; Malkki, 1995; Falge, 1997; Willems, 2003; Lubkemann, 2008; Keenan, 2013; Ocobock, 2017). Though their perspective departs from each other in many respects, they all reiterate the empirical and analytical emphasis on conflicts than the consensus. They don't explicitly explore how people labor to pacify social relations in conflicted African societies. Whenever scholars have addressed how social actors labor to acquire political consensus in Africa, they rather focused on the roles of transnational organizations related to the United Nations or other peace building efforts triggered by the geopolitical interests of the USA, China, Russia, France, Germany, England, just to mention the most prominent ones. This article argues that this emphasis on global players (Keenan, 2013; Bouhleb, 2020), deflects our attention from examining how ordinary social actors mobilize local cultural resources to advocate for

pacification in conflicted societies in Africa. More specifically, the article proposes to read the *alquitar* popular music as social movement by which the musicians in and from northern Mali contribute to political opinion formations that, on one hand, call for social consensus and contest the theocratic project of armed Muslim militant factions on the other hand. To this end, I take two dynamics of conflicted relations in northern Mali to reflect on the relevance of these musical practices to the quest of social and political consensus.

My demonstration is based on a four-step analysis. First, I sketch the longstanding history of conflicted relations in northern Mali. Second, I draw two dynamics of conflicted relations and reflect on how the music entrepreneurs and musical events address these tensions. Third, I discuss how the musicians position themselves *vis-à-vis* the theocratic project of armed Muslim militant factions in the Sahel. Fourth, I elaborate on how the ways in which my interlocutors politicize the *alquitar* practices can enable us to rethink civil society in a new and useful way from Africa. My understanding of musical practices as technologies of political mediation is informed by Angela Zito's processual interpretation of (social) "practice" as a mediating process; therefore, a process of mediation (Zito, 2008). My discussion also draws influence from scholarly debates on the significance of music to political mediation (see Cutter, 1968; Schulz, 2001; Potter, 2019) and critical anthropological perspectives on civil society in Africa (Ferguson, 2006).

My analysis draws on several research stays in northern Mali and among the Tuareg refugees from Mali in Niger between 2007 and 2025 (see Diallo, 2018; Diallo, 2019).¹ Given the region's political instability, doing research as a native from southern Mali bears challenges. However, my long-standing research experience in the region and my close ties to host families and informants enabled me to tackle these difficulties (see Diallo, 2018:chapter 2). My research topics varied through time. I started with 5 months research focused on schooling in 2007 for the completion of M.A in Visual Anthropology. Subsequently, in my dissertation, I explored the living conditions under which Tuareg refugees from northern Mali rebuild their lives in the Nigerien diaspora and how these conditions affect their self-understandings and cultural practices, established status hierarchies, and religious identity formation. My current project for my second monograph in preparation addresses how rising levels of insecurity and trans-border trafficking in the Sahara and northern Sahel, and related efforts of "securitization" in the context of a "global war on terror," affect long-standing local practices and understandings of proper Muslim religiosity and authority. Put otherwise, I explore sources and forms of religious authority and the making of a trans-local Muslim community in the heavily militarized border zone of Niger and Mali, by focussing on a religious group that so far has received little scholarly attention: the Dabakkar and their spiritual leader, Shaykh Abdou Salam ag Mohammadan.

My interest in the political significance of music began in 2012 (Diallo, 2018) and continued throughout the subsequent field stays. Fieldwork methods consisted of participant observation, collecting YouTube video clips and online viewers' comments; narrative interviews, and focus group discussions in Mali and Niger. The participant observation consisted of attending popular performances in Kidal, Gao, Timbuktu in northern Mali, and in Niamey, Niger. I also attended several *alquitar* rehearsals and conducted narrative interviews with musicians in Niger and Mali. I conducted narrative interviews and focus group discussions in Tamasheq, French, and occasionally in Bamanankan with Tuareg who have served in the Malian army or as schoolteachers in Mali prior to their migration to Niamey. Fieldwork in Niger took place in Niamey, Abala, Terbiet, Tillabery. In Mali, the research locations included Djecbok (Gao), Kidal town, Essuq, Adiel hoc in the region of Kidal and Bamako.

1. In total 38 months since 2007.

2. Mapping the ecology of warfare in postcolonial Mali

Scholars have discussed the recurring armed conflicts in postcolonial northern Mali from different angles. These include the Tuareg threat to national Unity since the early 1960s; the inter and intra ethnic conflicts in northern Mali, and the ongoing militancy of armed Muslim militant groups. One of these groups is the Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al- Muslimin (JNIM) affiliated with Al-Qaida. The other is the Islamic state in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) affiliated with the Islamic state in the Middle East. Regarding the tension between the Tuareg and the Malian state, what is known as the Tuareg's first rebellion mainly took place in the region of Kidal from 1963-64. One captured former rebel, Amouksou Ag Azandeher, explained the revolt against the Malian state as follows:

The reasons are numerous, but the main ones are:

1. We, nomads of the white race, can neither conceive nor accept to be commanded by blacks whom we always had as servants and slaves.
2. We Ifoghas, do not accept or conceive of the equality between races and men Mali wants to impose on us, starting with taking our *imghad* and *bellah* away from us.
3. We gain nothing from Malian independence, but heavy taxes and customs duties to pay.
4. The Malian Government thinks it is superior to our Chief Zeyd and does not listen to him.
5. The Malian gendarmerie mistreats us irrespective of whether they are wrong or right. (Lecocq, 2010, 188) ²

To suppress the rebels, argue Boilley(1999) and Lecocq (2010), the Malian army forces used heavy weapons resulting in several deaths. The droughts in the 1970s and 1980s futed the consequences of the political repression. For instance, during the first period of droughts in 1973-1974, the Tuareg lost many of their cattle and also many people. Lecocq following Kloth (Kloth ,1974) writes:

Survey data from 3,500 children emphasize the fact that undernutrition in the four country area is to be found more among nomads than sedentary persons, and more in the North than in the South. Children from nomad clusters ranged on the average ten to seventeen percent below the threshold while those from sedentary or Southern groups were approximately three to seven percent below. The existence of pockets of extreme undernutrition is supported by data from all countries but particularly from Mali where up to 80% of the children in one nomad cluster were acutely undernourished. The above statements on the nutritional status of children must be considered conservative. (Lecocq, 2010: 236-237)

According to Ag Litny, as a consequence of malnutrition in this period, there were days when people did not even leave the cemetery since there were so many bodies to be buried. Death became a common occurrence among the Kel Tamasheq (Ag Litny, 1992: 63). Before the nomads had been able to recover from the first drought, another one began (1983-1984). The bloody repression of the rebellion in 1963-1964 by the Malian army, followed by two disastrous droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, fueled the formation of the Tuareg diaspora stretching across borders to the neighboring countries of the Maghreb and West Africa. This diaspora was largely composed of youths confronted with the common experience of exile, unemployment, and rigid security regulations in the Maghreb. These conditions of exile led the Tuareg youths to develop a revolutionary vision for the nomad society (Lecocq, 2004). Calling themselves

² However, Klute underlines that the degrees to which these measures were implanted varied from one area to another. He also maintains that they affected the other Western Tuareg federations more than the Kel Adagh where the revolt broke out.

the Ishumar (meaning unemployed), these young Tuareg sought to promote the idea of the “tumast,” which, similarly to the *alquitar* performances in focus in the article, involved the call for the pacification of intra Tuareg tensions between and within the federations. In this sense, the Tuareg second rebellion was not only an armed uprising against the Malian state but also involved attempts to change the hierarchy and caste structure of Tuareg society itself. The rebellion started with the attack on June 28, 1990, in Menaka, and lasted, at least officially, until March 1996 with the ceremony of the peace flame held in Timbuktu.

On May 23, 2006, Tuareg fighters, under the leadership of Ibrahim Bahanga, targeted the Malian army garrison in Kidal, seized arms, and arrested the Governor of the region.³ For Lecocq, this was a renewed version of rebellion, this time rooted in internal tensions within Tuareg society. One aspect of this tension has been explained by the fact that some Tuareg, especially educated cadres, had benefited more from the state and NGO resources than their uneducated counterparts. Another aspect of internal tension that led to the rebellion in 2006 was the long-standing tension between the freeborn non noble groups and the noble warriors’ politically dominant groups.⁴ A peace accord signed in Algeria in July 2006 was merely a prelude to further protracted fighting between separatist fighters and the Malian army units under the leadership of Tuareg of vassal origins. This conflict came to an end in early 2009.

Yet since the early 2012 (just about three years later), another violent conflict broke out once again. It first started with an attack by the freeborn Tuareg secession movement MNLA (Mouvement pour la Libération de l’Azawad) against the Malian state in Menaka and later on turned into confused ethnic conflicts. The confusion was made even worse by the emergence of several Salafist Jihadist factions obsessed with implementing sharia law. After a short military campaign, these factions defeated the Malian army and subsequently occupied the northern regions, where the Jihadi-Salafist imposed sharia law.⁵ These conflicts were the consequence of the fall of Libyan President Gaddafi,⁶ of the influence of the international terrorist networks, and long-standing ethnic conflicts in northern Mali (Klute, 2012; Olivier de Sardan, 2013). Thus, the Fulani, Songhay, Arabs, and Bellah-Iklan groups created MUJAO in order to contain the growing freeborn Tuareg control over northern regions after the withdrawal of the Malian army (Olivier de Sardan, 2013).⁷

Between 2013 and 2022, several international armed forces and organizations made efforts to pacify the country. A peace accord known as the Algiers accord, between the Malian state and several armed factions but excluding the JNIM and the ISGS, was signed in 2015 (Bouhleb, 2020). Ferdahous Bouhleb interrogated the Algiers negotiations and expressed doubts about the success of the peace accord signed in 2015 without the JNIM and the ISGS. I don’t intend to give a “scorecard” of this accord here but the challenges related to the implementation led to its end in January 2024. The expansion of the activities of the JNIM and the ISGS even amplified Ferdahous Bouhleb’s doubts. The first map below introduces us to geographic areas and zones of influences of different subgroups in 2013. The second map reflects on the extent to which the two groups invigorated their presences by geographically extending their empires between

3. Alhamoudou Ag Ilyène from Kidal, who is currently member of government in Mali, was the governor at that time.

4. See Klute for the background dynamics of this conflict (Klute 2003).

5. The main Islamist factions were Mujao, Ansar Eddine, and AQMI (Alqaida au Magrheb Islamique).

6. The connection to Libyan conflicts was made through the facts that Gaddafi had been a key player in the Tuareg issue in Mali and Niger since the 1980s and also that many Tuareg soldiers fled Libya after Gaddafi’s fall to join the battleground in northern Mali.

7. Olivier de Sardan wrote that during the months that followed the withdrawal of the Malian army from the north, the MNLA members were held accountable for several cases of abductions and cattle raiding among other sorts of abuses upon the Bellah-Iklan, Songhay, and Fulani. Thus, in order to counterbalance the MNLA, many Fulani, Songhay, and Arabs joined, or even created, their own Islamist factions (Olivier de Sardan, 2012).

2016 and 2020. The third map offers the illustration that the two groups gained more grounds between 2020 and 2024.

On the third map, Liam Karr defined “the attack zone” as the areas where the units of the two Muslim militant factions conducted regular offensive operations against each other and against the units of international troops (Karr, 2024). The “contested support zones” index areas where multiple groups conducted offensive and defensive actions. This means that their respective control over these areas was not yet effective. The “support zone” areas where ISGS and JNIM did not face each other allowed each other to carry out their activities independently.

In a general way, the activities of Muslim militants, the numerous local vigilante groups, and the international military counter-interventions spawned heightened physical insecurity conditions for all the actors involved, as well as the residents in the border regions of Mali and Niger. As a result, the popular music performances can no longer take place in northern Mali under this ecology of insecurity. However, in spite of this development, the musicians still, as shown below, play an active role in the opinion formation against the armed Muslim militant groups.



Figure 1. A map of the conflicted areas at the beginning of French counterterrorism operations in January 2013. Source: Centanni, E. (2013). Mali conflict map: Gao and Timbuktu retaken. Political Geography

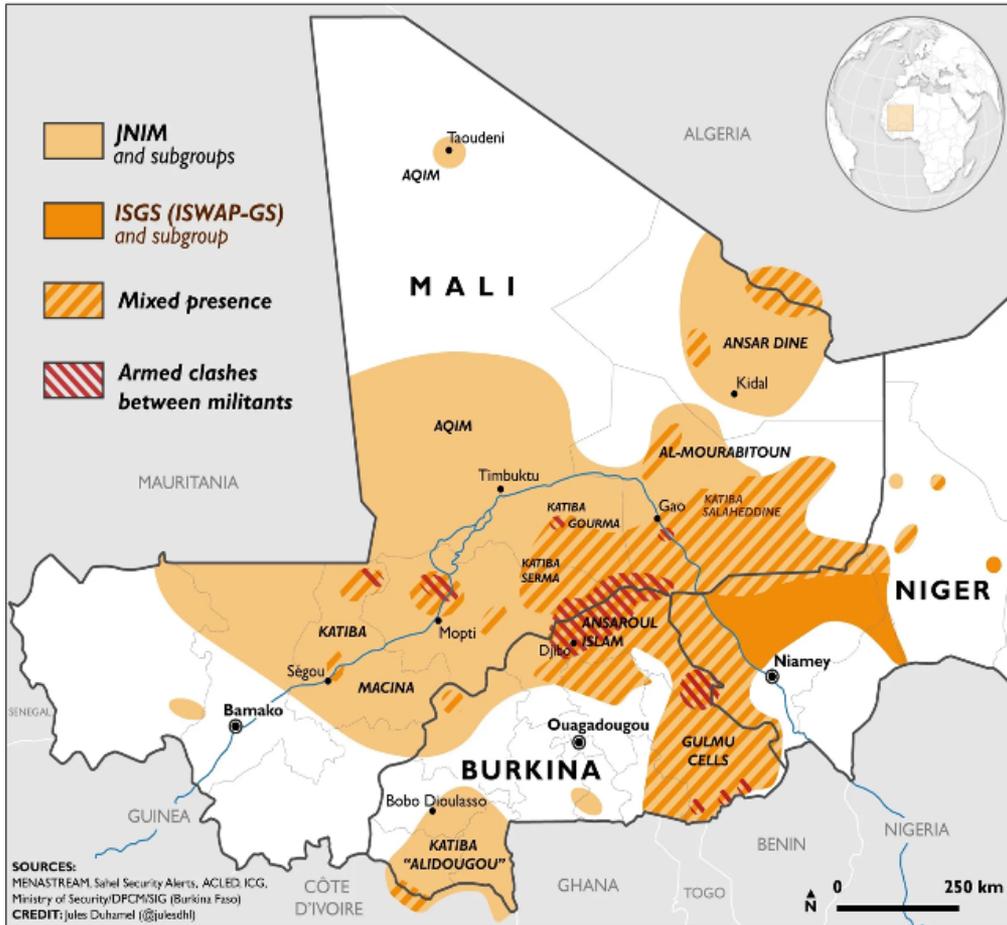


Figure 2. Insurgent Area of Operations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Western Niger (January 2016-June 2020). The map illustrates where both JNIM, as well as its constituent groups, and ISGS, have historically operated in the Sahel since January 2016.
 Source: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>

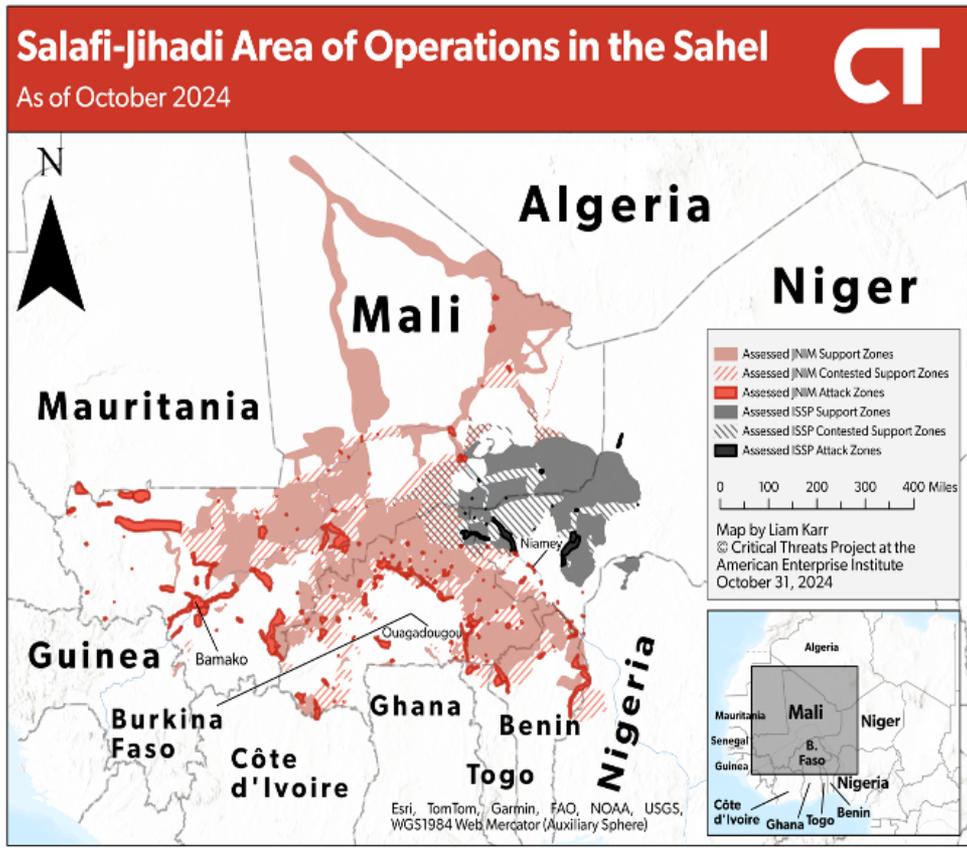


Figure 3. Current situation of areas under the influences of JNIM and ISGS.

Source: Liam Karr, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, Map updated November 1, 2024: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-november-2024-salafi-jihadi-areas-operation-sahel>.

3. The *festival du désert* as a political project for consensus

The first event of this festival took place in January 2000s. It was presented to the grand traditional festivals of Kidal (*Takoubelt*) and Timbuktu (*Temakannit*). The participants spent four days enjoying different songs, popular performances, and attended camel races among the Tuareg in northern Mali. Nowadays, the festival is opened to a broader audience. It includes artists from other regions of Mali, Africa, and Europe. The festival is organized by Essakane Production SAR in collaboration with the associations Tuareg Efès et Aitma under the leadership of the ministry of cultural affairs in Mali. The festival had already attracted 7,000 festival participants in 2004. In 2012, the festival was held in Timbuktu despite the risk of hostage taking by Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. Due to the instability induced by the ongoing Islamic militancy, the 2013 edition of the festival was also organized as a Caravan for peace and national unity in Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Since then, several musicians from northern Mali in exile organized yearly the festival outside Mali.

Speaking about how the *festival du désert* events held in Timbuktu related to the quest of political consensus in conflicted Mali, A. Sidibe, a music entrepreneur from the region of Kidal,

explained to me that:

when the festival moved to Essakane in Timbuktu, it established a good interaction between the Fulani, the Songhay and the Tuareg. You know the Tuareg had very difficult relations with the others. In the 1990s, the Tuareg militias had killed and dispossed several Songhay, Fulani in Gao and Timbuktu. There were Songhay villages where no Tuareg could go. Equally, the Songhay militia had killed several Tuareg in Gao and Timbuktu. The festival created an opportunity for the conflicting factions to leave the guns behind and dance together. The participants joined from all the three regions Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. During the festival, the Tuareg danced the Songhay music, and the Songhay danced the Fulani and Tuareg music alguitara. It was a kind of celebration of peace after the war. This role of music is not new in northern Mali. If you take all the ethnic groups separately and historically, the musicians performed music to celebrate the ends of all military confrontations between neighbors before the colonial era.⁸

Let begin the analysis with A. Sidibe himself. He is the current director of the centre Tumast which is an institution for the promotion of the Tuareg cultural activities in Bamako. He is Fulani from family background but has lived several years in Kidal where he has been active in the organization of Tuareg cultural activities. For him, the relocation of the festival in Timbuktu was partly informed by the quest of consensus between the Tuareg-Songhay and Faluni groups. In Timbuktu, he believed, the festival has brought together Tuareg-Songhay and faluni groups than Kidal. To understand this claim, we need to look at the social composition of the populations in Kidal and Timbuktu. Kidal is predominantly inhabited by the Tuareg. In Timbuktu, though the Songhay demongraphically form the majority of the population, there are also significant Tuareg and Fulani groups in the region. For this reason, A.Sidibé viewed the festival as a celebration of and an effort toward peace in the 2000s. In his view, dancing together, he insisted on, becomes a performative way of engaging with peace.

To understand further implications of Sidibe's account about the festival as an effort toward pacification, we need to place the statement within the inter ethnic tensions that opposed the Tuareg to Songhay since 1990s. For instance, in early 1994, the creation of Songhay vigilante brigade, Ganda Koy (created in April 1994) was prompted by these tensions.⁹ Indeed, the vigilante brigade had been seen as an effort on the part of the sedentary Songhay to counter what they considered a favoring of nomads to their own detriment. Arguing that they, too, had been suffering severely from rebel attacks on sedentary populations, representatives of the Songhay vigilante group vowed to protect their own people against the rebels and to contain a situation of insecurity in the northern regions. The following pamphlet conveys the rationale for the creation of the group:

Fellow citizens of the North, let us sweep away all nomads from our villages and cities, even from our barren land! Tomorrow the nomads will install themselves there as dominators. Black sedentary peoples, from Nioro to Ménaka, let us organise, let us take up arms for the great battle that waits. Let us send the nomads back to the sands of the Azawad. The existing social balance cannot be modified. The social economic problems of the North need to be solved for all citizens without discrimination. Why are there development projects for the nomads? Why are there army posts for the nomads? Why are there seats in parliament for armed

8. Selection from conversations with A.Sidibe on August 18th 2023 in Bamako.

9. MPGK (Mouvement patriotique Ganda Koy).

rebel-bandits? Because they took up arms and killed? That is inadmissible. The Gandakoye movement is born. Signed without us, the [National] pact is against us. The realities in the North show this. We should create insecurity for the nomads as they have created it for the sedentary populations. (Lecocq, 2010:337)

Already in May 1994, Captain Abdoulaye M Maiga and Lieutenants Lamine Diallo and Abdoulaye “Blo” Cissé, leading figures of the movement, deserted from the Malian army.¹⁰ Throughout the following months, the group mounted several attacks on the Arabs and Tuareg living in the vicinity of the Niger River.¹¹

The Bellah-Iklan, known as the former Tuareg slaves and descendants also created a group of their own to support the Songhay against their former masters in the Gao and Timbuktu regions. For example, when the Army attacked the freeborn Tuareg and Arab community in Léré in 1991, many Bellah-Iklan joined in, and even guarded the survivors outside the village for more than a year (Lecocq, 2010:350). Fati Wellet Hamomo, one former hostage in Léré between May 1991 and 1992, explained that:

The *bellah* took our possessions, engaged in trade in our place, set up shops almost everywhere in the south, killed our cattle. Others lived with our herds in the bush. They also killed people in the bush and looted their camps. During the last dry season, we had neither access to the wells, nor to the market because of the problems [between the Malian Army Forces and the rebels]. The bellah were charged to survey us. Some we knew, others we didn't. At night, military vehicles patrolled to prevent our escape. They threw stones at us when we tried to leave. (Lecocq, 2010:350)

During the final phase of the rebellion, which lasted from late 1994 until March 1996, efforts were made to dissolve the army factions through inter-community dialogues. This culminated in the peace agreement (*la flamme de la Paix*) celebrated in Timbuktu in March 1996 with the symbolic destruction of guns. Yet regardless of this declaration of the end of the civil war, major parts of the Tuareg population that had fled to neighboring countries were reluctant to come back.¹² Again, since 2012, the Ganda koy and Fulani revitalized the Ganda Koy in response to the Tuareg secessionist movement (Hernández, 2023). However, like the Tuareg secessionist movement, several Ganday Koy members later joined the armed Muslim groups. In this way, the existing inter and intra ethnic tensions informed and consolidated the JNIM and the ISGS.

In the light of these tensions, A.Sidibe's account above shows how the festival intended to establish a good interaction between participants from these ethnic groups in the 2000s after the bloody conflicts between the Songhay and the Tuareg throughout the 1990s. The festival can be seen here as complementary to the institutional efforts that led to the peace accord and “the peace flame” in Timbuktu in the late 1990s. For A. Sidibe, the fact that many ethnic residents from northern attended the events illustrated the generative power of music in the political mediation. Those who had taken the guns against each other in the 1990s came to dance together in the 2000s.

10. It was assumed that although these formally deserted from the national army, there was still considerable suspicion. This distrust was especially based on the fact that those who deserted were authorized by their superiors in the army, as it seemed that the military and the government did not have the same opinion on how to deal with the Tuareg (Lecocq, 2010).

11. However, it has often been argued that it was even sometimes difficult to know whether the regular soldiers or the Ganday Koy or the two together committed the attacks on the Arabs and red Tuareg.

12. In the case of Niger, a significant number of freeborn Tuareg among the refugees of the civil war in the 1990s did not go back to Mali.

Furthermore, A.Sidibe also established the festival as a continuation of historical practices of political mediation in northern Mali. He viewed the festival as a perpetuation of role played by musicians in precolonial northern Mali. Seen in this light, the *festival du désert* becomes a musical event, expressive of a historical form of political mediation that allows us to historicize the perspective on social movements prior to multiparty democracy era in Africa (Ferguson, 2006).

4. The *dagh tenere alquitar* performances in Niamey

Whereas A.Sidibé's statement about the *festival du désert* addressed the inter-ethnic conflicts in northern Mali, the music events by the *alquitar* group known under the name *dagh tenere* (the children of the desert and desert's children) point to the conflicted relations between the freeborn non noble and freeborn noble Tuareg. To understand the tensions between the freeborn noble and the freeborn non noble Tuareg in northern Mali, we need to situate them within historical processes that shaped longstanding sociocultural transformations among the Tuareg in northern Mali. Bernus (1981; Klute, 1992; Bourgeot, 1995; Boilley, 1999; Hureiki, 2003; Grémont, 2010; Lecocq, 2010; Klute, 2013) show that the Tuareg inhabiting the north of the Republic of Mali were politically and socially organized around some rival federations that referred to themselves as Kel Adagh, Ouillimiden Kel Ataram, and Kel Tinguériguif and Kel Antsar in the regions of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, respectively. The term "federation" (in Tamasheq, *ettebel*) refers to a set of clans that form a political unit under the leadership of one dominant clan (Lecocq, 2010:13). The different clans that make up one *ettebel* stand in hierarchical relationship to each other. The leader of the *ettebel* is called *amenokal*, which means "the owner of the land" and is also the symbol of power. Several federations rose and fell during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹³

These authors also portray the Tuareg social structure within the federations¹⁴ as a vertically ordered society. At the top of the social structure are the "noble" warriors, who are perceived racially as "white" or "red" (Lecocq, 2010: 5). According to Lecocq, the nobles distinguish themselves from the others by a culture of honor and shame. They referred to this culture as *temushagha*, "the way of the *imushagh*" (which connotes "the noble way of life"). Central to the noble way of life, he argues, was the knowledge of honor and shame and that of one's own lineage, called *temet*, and ancestry, which form the cornerstone of political organization. As main strategies of social reproduction, these clans (*tewsiten* in *Tamasheq*) practised intra-clan¹⁵ marriages. Another group of nobles was distinguished in early French colonial reports from the warrior nobility: the Ineslemen, families of religious experts. This group stood directly under the noble warriors in the social structure. The vassal groups, *imghad*, formed a separate group, politically and physically considered as weaker and socially inferior to the other two groups. In the pre-colonial era, the *imghad*, who are considered as the clan of the vassal groups, were in charge of herding their own animals as well as these of the nobles (Boilley, 1999).¹⁶ They paid tribute (*tiwse*) to the politically dominant clans which, in return, offered them protection against external attacks.¹⁷ Another social status group, called the Inadan, were craftsmen and

13. For example, Grémont(2010)and Lecocq (2010) argue that both contemporary Ouillimiden Kel Ataram and Kel Denneg formed one political entity earlier before splitting into two. A most recent history indicates that the Kel Adagh emerged as a federation of their own only under French rule (see Boilley,1999).

14. See Boilley (Boilley, 1999, also; Hureiki ,2003; Grémont, 2010; Lecocq ,2010), who offered historical accounts about the diversity and social stratifications of the Tuareg living in the regions of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal.

15. I mean here marriage between members within the same clan.

16. According to Lecocq, this was not necessarily true. He also argues that some *imghad*, but not all, have *temet* meaning a lineage to which they belong and which also kept them against impurity or political encroachments through marriage strategies that formed the basis of a policy to keep the social strata in place (Lecocq ,2010: 5).

17. Both Grémont and Boilley recall that there were constant rivalry and conflicting relations between different social

blacksmiths;¹⁸ they were and are conceived as racially black. Finally, at the bottom of the hierarchy stand the *Iklan*, or slaves, who perform domestic work and cattle herding on behalf of their masters; they are of unfree birth and considered racially black (Hall, 2005; Hall, 2011).

Klute and Lecocq maintain that this hierarchical structure has undergone significant changes over the recent decades (Lecocq, 2010; Klute, 2013)¹⁹. Lecocq even notes a shift in the terminology used in the self-ascriptions of certain social groups when, for example, some *imghad* began to refer to themselves as nobles, and consequently introduced the term *Timgheda* “the way of the *imghad*” (Lecocq, 2010:9). Although Lecocq speaks about these dynamics, his perspective on Tuareg society remains somewhat static, for instance, when he frames the differences between different social status groups in the Kidal area in terms of oppositions: between the freeborn and the unfree, strong versus weak, and lineage versus non-lineage. According to Lecocq, the first opposition between free–unfree manifests itself in norms of social conduct and in a labor ethic that are rooted in collective understandings of the mentality and ways of thinking considered to be typical and innate to the freeborn and the unfree (Berger, 2000:204–206; Lecocq, 2005; 55–57). The tandem strong–weak similarly arranges the noble warriors and the politically weak *imghad* in a hierarchical relationship. The last opposition, i.e. the lineage–non-lineage, points to relations between “those who claim a lineage and know their genealogy, and those who do not claim a lineage or do not know their genealogy” (Lecocq, 2010: 9). Having a lineage in the Tuareg society, according to Lecocq, is perceived to be the most fitting characteristic of noble origin and blood (Lecocq, 2010: 9).

The tensions between the noble freeborn and the freeborn non noble groups already played out throughout the Tuareg second rebellion in the 1990s. For instance, by January 1991, the FPLA (Front populaire pour la Libération de l’azawad), encompassing clans such as the Kel Antsar from the Timbuktu region and the Chamanamas from Gao and Dawsahak, was contesting the Kel Adagh leadership with Iyad Ag Ghali established at the head of the movement. Consequently, the Tamanrasset peace agreement signed by Ag Ghali gave way to open conflict. After the creation of the FPLA, the original movement took the name MPA (Mouvement populaire de l’Azawad). In November 1991, former vassal groups founded a new movement called the ARLA (Armée Révolutionnaire pour la Libération de l’Azawad) on the grounds that supporting the MPA, led by Iyad Ag Ghali, a freeborn man of noble origin, symbolized a legitimization of the former dominant clans politically. The founders of the ARLA, pleading for equality in Tuareg society, contested the peace agreement signed by Iyad Ag Ghali. These newly established Tuareg militant groups expanded the combat zones to all the three regions. They engaged in a fight with the central state and also among themselves. The ongoing conflict between GATIA (Imghad Tuareg self defense group and allies) and the member of FLA (Front de Libération de l’Azawad) are illustrative of these tensions. The GATIA, MSA-D (Mouvement pour le Salut de l’Azawad- Dawsahak), and the Malian army are allies of one another against the members of the FLA (Front de liberation de l’Azawad). In addition, existing conflicts between the freeborn noble Tuareg and the freeborn non noble Tuareg clans partly informed the groups’ attitudes toward the Muslim militants since 2012 (Klute, 2003; Klute, 2012).

For Georg Klute (2013), the long-lasting ecology of political unrest in and displacement from northern Mali informed the ideation of *alquitar* music. According to his account, *alquitar* emerged as a music genre among the Tuareg diaspora from Niger and Mali in Algeria and Libya in the 1970s. Most songs of the *alquitar* recollect the memory of violent events that the state effected against the Tuareg in Mali and Niger. They also express their nostalgia to return to their homelands. In the mid-1990s, once the rebellion in Niger and Mali had died down, the

and political constellations prior to the French occupation of the desert (Boilley, 1999; Grémont, 2010).

18. Schmidt compares this group to the Griots in southern Mali. Concerning Griots (see Schulz, 2001).

19. See Klute (2003) (also Lecocq 2010, chapter 5 and 6)

algitara performers adjusted to the new context of peace negotiations, and the concerts lost their clandestine and subversive character. Young people in the urban areas took it immediately; new groups were formed, and the *algitara* became the most popular musical genre among the Tuareg youth. The whole *Tinariwen* 1980s repertoire became the musical heritage and musical background for younger generations. As a result, the *algitara* music is currently considered as a world music outside West Africa.

Most scholarly studies of the *algitara* focus either on its role in the 1990s rebellions in Mali and in Niger (Belalimat, 2003, Rasmussen, 2006; Belalimat, 2008; Klute, 2013) or on its nature, specifically assessing whether it can be viewed as traditional or a global musical style (Borel 2006; Schmidt, 2009; Fischer and Kohl, 2010). Probing whether the *algitara* musical genre is traditional or modern, most conclude that it is not traditional at all. This is because the electric acoustic material used by performers made it “inauthentic” (Borel, 2006). Many authors argue that most performers are men, which makes contemporary *algitara* different from other authentic or *Tuareg* traditional musical genres: *anzad* or *tahardent* and *tendé* examined by Brandes (1989) and Card (1982). The melodies come from the traditional vocal repertoire but invent a set of guitar rhythms inspired by some of the syncopated rhythms of the *tinde* (traditional Tuareg female music). The basic form is a responsory song between the singer-guitarist soloist and the male or female chorus, interrupted with interludes of variable length, improvised on the melodic line. The music is testimony to a major stylistic novelty produced by crossing a melodic and polyrhythmic (*guitar and tinde*) instrument and a responsory song between the soloist and the choir. In her part, Rasmussen examines how the popularization of a musical genre previously associated with political protest and resistance resonates with cultural memory once the rebellion is over (Rasmussen, 2006).

In what I follow, I explore how the Tuareg *algitara* musician, Mohamed, the leader of the group *dagh tenere*, articulated his political opinion about the conflicted relations between the freeborn noble and the freeborn non noble Tuareg through music. Mohamed comes from the freeborn non noble Tuareg background. He was born in 1978 in the area of Gossi in Mali. He first arrived in Niamey with his parents from the area around Gossi due to the devastating drought of the 1980s. A year after their arrival, Mohamed’s father passed away. In the early 1990s, they went back to Mali and returned again to Niamey in 1994 due to the civil war. Since then, Mohamed has traveled to Lomé and Cotonou several times in search of seasonal employment. During these years, he learned and mastered the guitar and founded the group *Inor* meaning the light. Mohamed works currently as a security guard and lives with his wife, sister, mother, and a close friend, Hamida, another Tuareg of freeborn non noble group background from around Gossi. Indeed, Hamida and Mohamed first met in Lomé where they have both worked as seasonal employees since the 1990s. After a first failed marriage, Mohamed remarried in 2013. His new wife is also a Tuareg woman originally from the freeborn non noble Tuareg status group in the Timbuktu region. Mohamed’s status as a musician along with his constant good humor was manifested in his use of anecdotes throughout conversations, and this made him relatively famous among his peers in Niamey. This explains partly why no matter the time of the day, there were constantly several young freeborn Tuareg coming to pass the time with him at his shop along Tillabery road in southern Niamey.

His group includes several musicians of freeborn non noble Tuareg. The name of the group has changed over time. It was first called *inor* (light) around 2012. The team took the name of the *dagh tenere* (children of the desert or desert’s children) in 2019. The first album came out in 2021, and a subsequent one is currently in preparation. Most of the music popular performances, such as concerts, took place in Niamey. These were popular and attractive to urban Tuareg youth originally from Mali and northern Niger. Additionally, several Tuareg families solicited the Mohamed’s group to perform on wedding and naming ceremonies. Explaining what the

music stands for, the Tuareg from Mali in Niger, Mohamed put to me that:

When one says *algitara*, one just says Tuareg. Because, the aesthetics of this music and its lyrics of the songs make that it is just for us the Tuareg. When young Tuareg listen to it, they learn and get inspiration for their future. The future should be different from what we lived in the past. You know the Tuareg fought each other. They still continue to do so. Those who believed that they are noble Tuareg, don't respect the others. This has created conflicts even military confrontations between several Tuareg groups in northern Mali. Our aim to make the Tuareg aware that we should not give a focus to our internal differences. We should see ourselves as Tuareg, not more than that. If, many understand this, there will be peace in Tuareg societies in Mali. We have serious problem with each other. Some supported GATIA. The others are against GATIA. This is not good. This is what we try to promote peace when we perform music. Our aim is to enable peace between the Tuareg groups. The Tuareg in Niamey are happy about it. This is why they invite us to perform on their naming and wedlock ceremonies. I decided to become a musician to influence the opinions about the intra Tuareg conflicts.²⁰

Mohamed considered *algitara* songs as a medium of knowledge communication and dissemination among freeborn Tuareg. He argued young Tuareg learned about their past and inspiration for their future from listening to these particular songs. He also pointed to the generative power that the aesthetics and lyrics of *algitara* convey. *Algitara* generated consciousness of Tuareg identity and through this, Mohamed submitted, the Tuareg societies must undergo transformations. Accordingly, Mohamed chose to become a musician as he considered popular performances to be appropriate sites for socialization. He suggested that the Tuareg should focus on their internal unity than their differences. For Mohamed, the fact that his group received several invitations to perform on social events such as weddings and naming ceremonies illustrated that the Tuareg from Mali in Niamey have received his political message for the intra Tuareg consensus.

Sidi, an elderly man about 70 years old, to whom I paid regular visits in the quartier called Ryad in Niamey, held similar points of view. Whenever I visited, *algitara* songs sung by *dagh tenere*, accompanied our conversations around the tea kettle, either in his living room or in the courtyard, played from either his mobile phone or tapes. He has two memory sticks on which he stores his collections of songs. I once asked him why the *algitara* music was so common. He answered:

As a Tuareg I can only listen to *algitara* songs. But the songs by Mohamed and his group are even particular as they emphasize on the intra Tuareg conflicts. They call for peace among the Tuareg. You know this. The problem is not the Malian state as such. It is rather the problem between different groups of Tuareg. The group of Mohamed calls for transformations in the Tuareg society. We need peace in our societies. When I listen to Mohamed, it reminds me of what I should not do. What I should not do is to consider that I am different from other Tuareg. This is why I visit every Tuareg from Mali in Niamey.²¹

The emphasis on the relevance of music to the pacification of the intra Tuareg relations is straightforward in this account. For Sidi, the songs sung by Mohamed and his group generated the awareness about the major challenge to which the Tuareg were confronted with. As he

20. From conversation on 22/09/2012 in Niamey.

21. Selected from conversation on February 4th, 2013 in Niamey.

argued it, this was not the tension with the Malian state since the 1960s but rather the internal tension between the freeborn noble and the freeborn non noble Tuareg. The account points to the transformative power of music sung by Mohamed. For instance, Sidi argued that the songs reminded him of what he should not do which is to consider the internal difference between the Tuareg. For this reason, he posited himself as someone who has changed his habits due to what he heard and learned from the music. Accordingly, he considered his casual visits to other Tuareg families from Mali in Niamey as illustrations of these transformations.

These transformations, I argue, also partly grew in response to the social conditions of the Tuareg from Mali in Niger. It is difficult to put these Tuareg in exile in the same category. They went to Niger in different waves (between 1963 and 2024). They live interspersed with non-refugee residents in urban Niamey, the capital town of the Niger Republic. Originally, these Tuareg inhabited the northern regions of Mali (Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal). They fled to Niamey between 1963 and 2025. While some arrived in Niger between 1963 and 1968,²² others left Mali due to the well-known devastating droughts in 1973–1974 and 1983–1984, and the ethnic conflicts in the 1990s and the intense activities of armed Muslim militants since in 2012.

Some work as guards in private domiciles and others as drivers or local experts for transnational NGOs. Since 2012, those who arrived already in the 1960s and subsequent decades, created jointly with Songhay refugees from Gao, on their own initiative, a structure known as the *commission de crise* in French. The committee works since 2012 in the following manner: the freeborn Tuareg members of the committee are in charge of identifying and recording their fellow white Tuareg in Niamey. In their part, the Songhay members of the committee deal with Songhay, Bellah, and Fulani. Since its creation the main task of this committee has been to persuade NGOs of the urgent need for humanitarian assistance for several displaced groups in urban settings. Whenever the committee receives donations for its members, it immediately sets the days for distributions. The distributions take place in the courtyard of the former Mali consulate in the neighborhoods of Koira Kano.

Most of these town settled Tuareg I followed during my research could not sustain their family with food received from these donations and low paid jobs such as security guards in private domicile in urban Niamey. This situation of economic hardship affecting domestic relations is not, as we shall see, specific to the Tuareg under study here. It is a more general condition experienced by several other urban inhabitants in Niamey where recent global economic processes affected domestic relations (see Youngstedt, 2013). For instance, the Structural Adjustment programs (SAPs) launched in the midst of the 1980s had terrible consequences on Nigeriens in general and on Niamey's inhabitants in particular: skyrocketing prices for Western biomedical pharmaceuticals and hospital admissions, the elimination of scholarships and increased school fees (Youngstedt, 2013: 43). This resulted in frequent school closures over the years, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, as well as a higher unemployment rate.

Moreover, present-day marriage predicaments, typical for inhabitants of Niamey, are a result of these broader social developments. Many young men, frustrated by their inability to secure the funds necessary to get married, are forced to postpone marriage, the step that grants them adult status as husbands until their late twenties and thirties. This stemmed from the inflated costs of, particularly staple, food, which has caused a decline in the standard of living and in spending power (Youngstedt, 2013: 43–45). Domestic relations for freeborn Tuareg have also been reshaped by these changes. My informants in Niamey viewed their state of being *adinat n banan* or *aytedim* as a result of their limited spending power in urban settings over the past recent years. To them, their economic situation undermined their capacity to respond to

22. Since most military operations of and subsequent restrictions from the Malian authorities around that time took place in the region of Kidal, the informants I met in Niamey who fled this conflict were also from this region.

expectations placed on them as husbands and fathers over the recent years. I have elsewhere argued that these social conditions of exile shaped the ways in which the Tuareg from Mali, engaged with the *algitara* musical practices (Diallo, 2018:chapter 7). In this way, I view the *algitara* practices as forms of mobilization of cultural resources in response to warscape in Mali and Niger (Lubkemann, 2008).

5. Analytical lessons from the *festival du désert* and the *dagh tenere*

I view both the *festival du désert* and the *dagh tenere* as a form of social action (Tambiah 1985) and musicians as actors of civil society. For instance, in video clips included in the film *Mali blues*, Ahmed ag Kaedi, a Tuareg musician, extended A. Sidibe's perspective in the following terms:

“for us musicians from Mali, there is no distinction between the north and the south of Mali. We stand together to pacify the hearts in Mali. We tell them that war is not good. We are musicians from the Songhay, Tuareg, Bambara ethnic groups. The *festival du désert* is no longer an event for the Tuareg only. It mobilizes musicians and participants from all ethnic groups in Mali. They all come together to celebrate peace and to defeat war. Since, we can no longer do performances in northern Mali, we play outside Mali. We do it in Mauritania, Burkina Faso. Our aim is to protest against the theocratic order which the jihadist groups have imposed in several regions of Mali. That's the reason why we staged the film of music clips known under the name “Mali blues.”²³

Here ag Kaedi, in many respects, reiterated the points of view put forward by Sidibe. But he also moved beyond a focus on the tensions between the ethnic groups, and the intra Tuareg tensions in the northern Mali. He viewed the fact that the musicians from the northern and southern regions of Mali met for the festival as a joint effort with political implications. The musicians stood together to sensitize the participants and the listeners about the negative effects of war. This is illustrated in his explanation of how the festival is no longer an exclusive Tuareg's event. That, it has become a multiethnic event which brought together the Songhay, Tuareg, Bambara ethnic groups. Ahmed Ag Kaedi also introduced us into how the format of the festival has changed over time. The change resulted from the ongoing activities of the armed Muslim militant groups in most areas in Mali. Accordingly, the musicians organized the event outside Mali. They also staged the film “*Mali Blues*” which circulated transnationally in and beyond West Africa. In this film, the musicians reiterated their call for peace and rejection of the theocratic order at work in several areas in rural today's Sahel.

This demonstrates that though the format of the festival has changed, the political aim remained intact. For instance, Ahmad ag Kaedi argued that the musicians from different regions of Mali still come together for the event. He also took the film as the political opinion of musicians who criticize the activities and the theocratic project of Muslim Militant groups. In this sense, I propose to view the popular performances of the *festival du désert*, despite changes in its format, as a form of political action under and in response to the current social conditions of war. Taken together, A. Sidibe's and Ahmad ag Kaedi's statements substantiate the observations by Cutter (1968); Schulz (2001), and also Potter (2019) who stress the strong relevance of popular music performances to processes of state formation in postcolonial Mali.

Similar to the *festival du désert*, I also view *dagh tenere* as a transnational social movement in two interrelated ways. First, the singers and the consumers of *dagh tenere* music addressed the conflicted relations in Mali through popular music performances in Niamey. The songs from these popular performances circulated transnationally through recordings made with

23. He also explained this point to me in a conversation on September 30th, 2023, in Bamako

mobile phones, YouTube video clips and DVD albums. For instance, the *alquitar* songs sung by Mohamed's group are also popular in northern Mali. Though popular music performances no longer take place in most of the rural settings in northern Mali, I witnessed on several occasions, young men and female listening to songs sung by Mohamed's group from their mobile phones in Gao and Menaka. Echoing Sidi's comments, my interlocutors in Gao and Menaka also explained the popularity of the *dagh tenere* as a result of their political opinions that propose peace between different Tuareg status groups.

Taken together, the *festival du désert's* and the *dagh tenere's alquitar* practices prompt us to rethink the critical anthropological literature on social movement, term Ferguson uses to refer to civil society (Ferguson, 2006). Ferguson's perspectives break away from the scholarship that customarily traced its origins to eighteenth-century liberal thought, namely to Scottish enlightenment thinkers such as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Ferguson, and later Adam Smith (Ferguson, 2006:90). The works of these liberal thinkers are both associated with the conceptualization of society as a self-regulating mechanism and with the concept of natural law. In post-Cold War African politics, the term "civil society" has increasingly come to be associated with democratization or social movement, or even interchangeably used interchangeably for these (Ferguson, 2006: Chapter 4). The term is used as a generic term to refer to a cluster of actors and organizations considered to be mediating and operating between the state, above and the local or grassroots people at the bottom of the society. Seen from this lens, the civil society organizations are therefore significant local and national actors in post-cold war African politics.

Critical anthropological and historical scholarship deconstruct this positionality. They understand the civil society as transnational actors connected to the states in the Global North. They challenge the understanding of civil society organizations in Africa as non-state actors. For them, the NGOs operating in forms of civil society in Africa cannot be understood without considering their links to states in Euro-America (Ferguson, 2006). The critical perspectives also emphasize that instead of improving governances in Africa, the NGOs have contributed to the rolling back of African states as they had to withdraw from key sectors including social services such as the provision of facilities for education, health, and security. Though these critical perspectives offered some insights into African politics in the recent decades, they limited their input to viewing the civil organizations as Euro-America driven transnational dynamics, leaving out other complex dimensions of state formations in postcolonial Africa (see Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 1998; Mann, 2015). In doing so, I argue, scholars did not consider historical forms of civil society in Africa and reflect on the new meanings these actors have acquired in post-cold war global politics.

In this regard, the examples of the festival du désert and the activities by the *dagh tenere* offer insight into scholarly debates on social movements. I read both musical practices as non western state funded transnational forms of political mobilizations that address the conflicted relations in contemporary Mali. This suggests that an exclusively (western) state centric perspective on social movement as discussed by Ferguson(2006), defects scholarly attention from the social other actors who endorsed important roles in contemporary African politics.

6. Conclusions

This article has traced the longstanding and intermingled conflicted relations in postcolonial Mali. These included the history of conflicted relations between the Malian state and the Tuareg; the inter ethnic conflicts between the Songhay and the Tuareg, and the tensions between the freeborn noble and the freeborn non noble Tuareg. It addressed the ways in which the musicians and the consumers related their musical practices to the quest of social and political consensus in Mali. The discussions focused on the narratives about the *festival du désert* and the activities by

the *dagh tenere* formed by the Tuareg from Mali in Niger.

A key finding of the discussions shows the *festival du désert* as a form of mobilization in response to the conflicted relations between the southern and the northern regions of Mali but also the tensions between the ethnic groups living in the north. This included collaboration between musicians from different groups who came to voice together for peace. Another result of the discussion in this article sheds light on how the musicians of the *festival du désert* articulated their disagreements with the Al-Qaida affiliated groups through music performances outside Mali.

The analysis of the activities by *dagh tenere* musicians demonstrated the generative power of music. This was illustrated in how the songs sung by the *dagh tenere* informed and transformed opinions about the conflicted relations between the freeborn non noble and the freeborn noble Tuareg groups. Furthermore, the article offers a critique of the critique of civil society in anthropology. It argues that focusing on Art and political mediation in Africa allows us to historicize the perspectives on civil society and to rethink it from Africa. This also suggests the need to consider the multiple forms of social movement in Africa. Distinguishing, I argue, the efforts of various artists from transnational western states funded NGOs, is a good starting point of this task. To understand the relevance of these actors to social movements, scholars need to pay a sustained attention to local receptions of these efforts. Equally, the policymakers may think how to include the non western states funded social movements such as the musicians into the institutional efforts of consensus building in contemporary Muslim Sahel.

Biography notes

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