

News/Feature

Niger: Standing at the crossroads

This is the last of four articles on Africa.

by N. Cameron

The country of Niger has served as a crossroads in Africa from time immemorial. Many are the peoples who have passed through the east-west corridor it offers, between the Air Massif mountains and the Sahara desert of the north, and the dry north-central Nigerien plateau to the south, or have slipped north or south upon the waters of the mighty Niger River. A tide of African Empires (Ghana; Mali; Hausa) has surged into and faded out of the arid corridor.

Today, the people of Niger find themselves at a political crossroads. While Niger was going through the progressive stages of acquiring its autonomy from France, culminating in its independence in 1960, several independent political parties existed within the African country. One was Sawaba, a socialist party led by Djibo Bakary. Another party was the Nigerien branch of the RDA (English translation: African Democratic Assembly), an association encompassing all the nations of French-speaking Africa. Its leader was Diori Hamani. The two leaders, raised in the same household (as adoptive brothers), took very different roads as adults.

Bakary, a powerful union leader, leaned to the left and towards nationalism. Hamani, in position as Head of State since December 1958, outlawed Bakary's party in 1959, exiled Bakary and other influential leaders, and set up a single party rule, effective upon independence. Under a system wherein only he was allowed to run for office, he was 'elected' President of this new African nation in 1960, 1965, and 1970. By 1974, with the situation exacerbated by a drought in place since 1968, Hamani was ousted by the Nigerien military.

Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché began his military rule as the saviour of the people. Not wishing to identify his group as a political party, he chose to call it the "National Development Council." Over the next five years, in spite of the continuation of drought into the late 1970s, he created oases of development all over the country.

It was through the institution of "samaria" that Kountché was able to accomplish so much. Originally existing more as an organization for young people, offering various activities to keep youths busy, samaria was greatly widened in its membership and its scope by Kountché. Under his hand, samaria became an instrument to harness the co-operative effort of the entire populace, at all levels of society. It operated on the national level, at the level of all the 'departments' ('provinces'), at the level of each city, town, or village, and then in sub-districts below that.

Saturday was the day for samaria.

Every able bodied person in the country devoted their Saturdays to samaria projects. On a Saturday morning, gathering in the samaria compound (allocated in each district by the government), each citizen would choose which of the several on-going projects he or she would like to work on for that day. Joining that group, he or she would be transported by the government to the job site. In this way, schools and clinics were built, irrigation systems were dug, crops were sown and harvested, and the encroaching Sahara Desert was pushed back through environmental reclamation.

Under the samaria leaders, civic maintenance was carried out as well as construction projects. Each samaria had its own treasurer as well as coordinators assigned to matters of garbage collection, administrative paperwork, community health and hygiene, sports, entertainment, youth projects, etcetera. The leader of the men and boys was known by the title of "sarkin samari," the leader of the women-who-are, or have-been-, married was the "magagia," and the leader of the unmarried women was called "jermakoye" (or "zarmakoye"). These leaders were chosen by the people through consensus. (In Nigerien tradition, natural leaders were recognized and their authority respected.)

For five years, the government-initiated system of samaria worked. But, after so much had been accomplished, and the return of the rains had brought relief to a parched land, Kountché failed to relax his rule. The close management and strict accountability which he had instituted to combat corruption began to weigh heavily on the people, both civilian and military. Several unsuccessful coups d'état were launched.

It was death (by natural causes) which finally deposed Kountché in 1987. Colonel Ali Chaibou was appointed as his successor. Although the Presidential election campaign was still confined to one candidate (himself), significant reforms were initiated by Chaibou. Freedom of speech was reinstated, freedom to disagree, and to vote. Independent newspapers and radio stations sprang up. The exiled labor

leader, Djibo Bakary, was permitted to return to the country, where he resumed working towards change. Unions, dissolved under Kountché, were re-allowed under Chaibou.

The real catalyst for change was set off by a series of circumstances. In 1990, a series of strikes took place, protesting the shortage of classrooms and professors at Niger's sole university, at Niamey (the capital). The trouble broke out when students proceeded to hold a demonstration, despite having not obtained the necessary license. Although the demonstration was peaceful, the fact that the students were acting without proper authorization led to police intervention. During the melee, several civilians were shot and killed.

Students, union leaders and members, concerned groups and individuals rose up and demanded not only retribution, but also major changes in government. Chaibou found that the removal of certain persons from office was not enough - the citizens demanded the calling of a "National Conference," to set the country on a new course for the future.

The National Conference was held in July 1991. Delegates from labor unions, the student union, and every other representative group were on hand. Chaibou learned that the citizens not only wanted the Constitution to be changed, they wanted a multi-party political system set up. When the National Conference declared its sovereignty, Niger became the site of a civil coup d'état.

The first acts of the National Conference were to remove from power the members of the Supreme Military Council, which had been the ruling party since Kountché's rise. An interim President, Prime Minister, and Ministers were appointed. (Chaibou was chosen, with Bakary's support, to serve as the acting President in light of the positive changes Chaibou had initiated.) A judiciary council was set up to send the corrupt to jail. A fifteen-month period of 'transition' was announced, to facilitate the switch from a single-party system to a multi-party system.

To coordinate the transition, a body was formed, called the High



Celebrating in Niger

Court of the Republic. Serving as both parliament and the constitutional assembly, the High Court is currently overseeing the changes and drawing up a new Constitution for the country. Although, technically, the fifteen-month transitional period ended in December 1992, the process is taking longer than anticipated.

Following the drafting of a new Constitution, upon which all subsequent acts will be based, elections will be held to staff the government office of the country - from top to bottom. Filling first the local positions of mayor and city council in each community, the elections will move to higher and higher strata of rule, culminating with the election of the President of the nation.

As the nation of Niger stands at this crossroads, the world watches, and foreign investment hangs in the air. But, inside the country, life goes on as always. In the cities, young people gather to play cards or to watch the single television channel, or maybe go to a movie. In the villages, relatives visit for hours, talking and snacking on cola nuts. Or the people play a traditional game of chess.

Some days are marked by cultural events, such as a naming ceremony for a child. Hereditary musicians gather with their many in-

struments - the dondon, the molo, the algai'ta, the balafon - to make music for the dancers. In the west of the country, it will be the women who are dancing, in the east, the men and women dance together.

Perhaps the neighborhood will gather in the samaria compound, where a house has been constructed to host social events. Here, deliberate efforts are made to preserve cultural traditions, in dance and cooking, etcetera. Traditional cooking includes "yassa" - chicken with lemon and onions, or "mafe" - beef stew with peanut butter. "Touwo" is a type of porridge, and "bassi" is another staple food (known as "couscous" in French).

Whatever the occasion, it is used to make fun of things, to ridicule, to make the harness of life a little easier to bear.

Standing at the crossroads, the African nation of Niger is ready to take the next step. Behind lies a crooked path of government corruption and dictatorship, ahead stretches a high road of peaceful democracy. Should the government of Niger stray from the straight and narrow in the future, the rhythms of the gomme will pulsate in the distance, its chanting growing louder and louder, as the People of the Niger raise their voice.

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