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**Jannik Schritt**

**CRUDE POLITICS:**

**OIL TALK, NEW MEDIA AND POLITICAL  
SCRIPTS IN THE PRODUCTION OF DISORDER  
IN ZINDER (NIGER)**



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# Crude Politics: Oil talk, new media and political scripts in the production of disorder in Zinder (Niger)

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## Content

Abstract .....	2
Introduction .....	3
Significations of oil .....	4
Oil-Age Niger .....	5
Crude politics .....	6
The <i>élus locaux</i> in Zinder .....	7
An amalgamation of business, civil society and political party: Dan Dubai and the MPPAD .....	9
A divided civil society: regime loyalists and opponents in the conquest for daily allowances and 'envelopes' .....	10
The sultan, religious authorities and the government .....	11
Urban youth: the 'critical mass' to govern .....	13
The subaltern: expropriated rural farmers and women .....	15
The politics of naming, blaming and claiming in oil-age Niger .....	16
Media technologies, travelling ideas and the how of politics in Niger .....	17
Conclusion: situating politics, enacting oil talk .....	19
References .....	20

# **Crude Politics: Oil talk, new media and political scripts in the production of disorder in Zinder (Niger)**

## **Abstract**

The nascency of an oil state is characterized by talking oil politics. In this oil talk, the travelling idea of the resource curse takes center stage in speech acts of naming, blaming and claiming to question the legitimacy of political opponents. Conducting a situational analysis, this article focuses on the public political debate about oil in Niger's media landscape before, during and after the oil refinery's inauguration ceremony in Zinder in late 2011. I situate the actors' oil talk according to their positions in the political arena to reveal their hidden transcripts. By doing so, I will show that the oil talk is enacted in a double sense. First, it is the political actors' scripts that shape the very articulation of their oil talk in a context of political competition in a multi-party system. Second, the oil talk is enacted through an actor-network of media technologies and political players' access privileges that allow some to articulate their political views whereas others lack the means to do so. I use these findings to discuss the impact of new media in Nigerien politics and to decode the 'how' of Nigerien politics itself.

**Key words:** oil, politics, Niger, new media, situations, translation

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## Introduction\*

When we think about oil, we might picture oil catastrophes like Deepwater Horizon, of birds covered with oil, oil-contaminated water, burning oil fields, rebels in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, American soldiers invading Iraq or oil riches displayed in Dubai-style architecture. Although these are all realities of oil, the most important dimension of oil in the *early phases* of an oil state's development like Niger that had signed a production sharing agreement with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in 2008 and inaugurated its first oil refinery in late November 2011 – and this falls beyond these expected pictures – is *oil talk*<sup>1</sup>: people meet, sit together and talk about the country's oil future. In this talk, globalizing images and ideas of oil play a crucial role. Thus, people in Niger discuss whether their country will turn towards conflict like their big neighbor Nigeria or whether oil will bring them a luxury life displayed in the oil riches of Arab states to which Nigeriens travel during their hajj.

This paper is about how talking about oil participates in making oil a social and political reality in Niger and thereby reconstructs social and political difference and reinforces patterns of domination. I thus argue that there is another important element in this oil talk: in the public political debate, talking about oil is not simply for communicative reasons but for talking politics. It is about contesting political positions by using images of oil production and its effects. In other words, political players attempt to question the legitimacy of opponents with speech acts of “naming, blaming and claiming” (Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1980–1981). Therefore, oil talk is politically structured according to the positions of actors in a particular political arena. It is thus the actors' political scripts that shape the very significations of oil. In this way, oil talk is what I coin *crude talking*: talking politics in the language of oil.

I then argue that the oil talk is enacted in a double sense. First, as already mentioned, the enactment takes place through the logic of the political script that shapes the very articulation of significations of oil. Second, however, the oil talk is enacted by the relations of an actor-network (Latour 2007). I show how the radio, mobile phones, text messages and political players in the context of political competition in a multiparty system co-produce a particular political logic in Niger. Only by considering the co-production of new media and politics in Niger does understanding the specific character of political dynamics of oil become possible. In this sense, new media have not only become important devices in the political players' tactical repertoire but also shaped the 'how' of playing politics in Niger.

To make my argument, I first briefly discuss my theoretical take on significations of oil. After introducing the context of talking politics in oil-age Niger, I then analyze the political game that was played in the town of Zinder before, during, and after the oil refinery's inauguration in late 2011. To illustrate my argument, I will first detail the different actors' practices of naming, blaming and claiming and show how these practices aim at (de)legitimizing political positions. I then focus on media technologies to show how the content, form and means of oil talk dialectically shape each other, thereby producing the particular politics of oil-age Niger.

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1 The expression 'oil talk' comes from Arthur Mason “as a way of encapsulating the now vast field of writing on oil and the discursive carbon world of which it is part” and was used by Michael Watts in a review essay on two recently published oil books (Watts 2013, 1013). However, I use it here as a close description of reality that characterizes the early phase of an oil state.

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## Significations of oil

The scholarly debate about oil centers on the resource curse thesis, according to which the production of oil would lead to economic decline, the emergence of authoritarian regimes, violent conflicts, corruption and environmental pollution (Auty 1993; Karl 1997; Ross 2012). Whereas proponents of the resource curse thesis mostly focus on oil as money to explain the effects oil has on politics and the economy, anthropologists from the very beginning pointed to the role of the significations of oil, be they in state-building processes (Coronil 1997), cultural production (Apter 2005) or conflicts (Behrends 2008). It has therefore been suggested that anthropologists' (further) contribution to the study of oil could rest in perspectives on significations (Behrends and Schareika 2010). In their programmatic article, Andrea Behrends and Nikolaus Schareika conceptualize significations as produced in and for political processes of negotiation between actors with different economic interests, power positions and socio-political knowledge. They suggest looking at interactive communications and communicative practice to study the use of speech and symbols as the means of discursively creating social and political order and to influence others (*ibid.*). This analysis of speech and symbols as instruments of power must not only focus on the meanings conveyed, but also on the material and technological means used for their very conveyance, if not the production of meanings in and through the act of conveyance. Or, as Bryan Pfaffenberger has put it: "Symbols do not create meanings – activities do" (2010). Therefore, any symbolic anthropology needs the anthropology of technology (*ibid.*). I try to bring the perspective on material-semiotics together by empirically focusing on 'political situations' as uncertain, ambiguous and contested events on the one hand and as assemblages that include material artifacts and technologies as well as discursive movements of ideas on the other hand (Barry 2012).

In order to empirically study discursive movements of ideas, the concept of 'travelling ideas' or 'travelling models' has been suggested (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996; Rottenburg 2009; Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014). Within these concepts, the theory of translation (Callon 1986) takes centre stage as the basic operation in the travels of ideas (Kaufmann and Rottenburg 2012). Translation here means the process of 're-territorialisation' or 're-embedding' that is to say the building of connections, relations and associations with existing elements within the context of destination that change the travelling idea as well as the network in which the idea is integrated (*ibid.*). The resource curse thesis is a case in point for a travelling idea that articulated all around the globe. This might be through its translation into models of revenue distribution like in Chad (Hoinathy and Behrends 2014), the creation of the Worldbank funded EITI and PWYP transparency initiatives (Weszkalnys 2011), its appropriation into journalistic reports and into the agenda of various NGOs that use the idea of the resource curse in their advocacy campaigns against governments and oil majors or, as I will show, its translation within micro-political disputes and negotiations.

Yet instead of assuming quite homogeneous cultural contexts of transfer, i.e. a national context of departure and a national context of destination (Espagne 2013), I will show how these images, ideas and models are translated in a very heterogeneous political arena in which different political actors dispute over power, resources and legitimacy (Bierschenk 1988; Bierschenk and Olivier Sardan 1995; Bailey 1969; Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre and Tidjani Alou 2009). In order to understand the transformation processes induced by the travels of ideas, we have to situate the translation processes as skilled and knowledgeable practices (Haraway 1988) in its particular sites to identify the positions, projects and practices of the political actors involved (Li 2003).

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As Andrew Barry states (2013a, 426–27), politics are simultaneously about secrecy and publicity, about making some things and ideas public and transparent while others are tried to be kept beneath the surface. In other words, politics are about ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ (Goffman 1973). Frontstage, the political spectacle is constructed through political narratives that try to address the needs and desires of the population (Edelman 1988). Backstage, however, the public narratives mask (individual) political projects. Thus, whereas the frontstage enables us to analyze the event, content and form of political narratives (Gadinger, Jarzebski, and Yildiz 2014), we need to reveal the connections between the narratives on the frontstage and the backstage political projects. Turning James Scott (1990) upside down, I will reveal the ‘public’ and ‘hidden transcripts’ of the powerful actors within the political arena of Zinder – the second biggest city in Niger situated in the East – and show that subalterns hardly have ‘public transcripts’ because they lack access to the frontstage of the political game (cf. Spivak 1988). By focusing on the frontstage of the public political debate around oil in Zinder and using my knowledge of Nigerien politics that I acquired during 13 months of fieldwork in Niger (6 months in Zinder and 7 months in Niamey) over a period of 5 years within the methodological framework of the extended case method (Gluckman 1940; van Velsen 1967; Evens and Handelman 2006; Burawoy 2009), I situate the oil talk according to the political actors’ positions within the political arena and reveal their hidden transcripts.

### Oil-Age Niger

Niger belongs to the Sahel-Saharan countries (Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad) that are among those African states where oil exploration activities have so far remained low, due to their harsh environment and land-locked position (Augé 2011). The first oil explorations in Niger started as early as in 1958 – while Niger was still a French colony – following the 1956 discovery of oil in neighboring Algeria. Yet it was uranium, not oil, which took center stage in post-colonial Niger. The presence of uranium in Niger had already been confirmed by 1956. The French considered Niger’s uranium of geostrategic importance for their energy supply and for becoming a nuclear *‘force de frappe’* and thus forcefully intervened (through harassment, intimidation, repression, military deployment, propaganda and financial support) in the independence referendum on 28 September 1958 in order to realize a ‘Yes’ vote for Niger to remain within the French dominated *Communauté* instead of immediate independence through a ‘No’ vote (van Walraven 2009; van Walraven 2013). Through this intervention on behalf of Hamani Diori, France not only laid the foundation for the autocratic regimes which were to follow independence and remain until the democratic transition in the early 1990s, but also started to systematically favor western Nigerien belonging and Zarma ethnicity over eastern belonging and other ethnic groups, thus profoundly shaping the Nigerien political landscape for the years to come (Lund 2001, 847). Until the National Conference and the transition to democracy in 1991, the Zarma became dominant in higher education, the administration and the army, and constituted the political elite of the country (Ibrahim 1994). The introduction of a multi-party system in Niger gave rise to a decade of experimentation and repetitive breakdowns of the institutional order (Villalón and Idrissa 2005) and thereby changed the rules of the game. Thereafter, with the emergence of new social (civil society associations and labor unions) and political actors (political parties), political competition and strategic conflicts between the opposition and the government majority became an integral part of the rules of the game. It was in this context that the oil project started in 2008 and was then put to use in political disputes.

At the oil refinery's foundation stone ceremony in Zinder in late 2008, the political entourage of then Nigerien president Mamadou Tandja launched a political campaign called *Tazartché* (Hausa for 'continuation') to change the constitution in order to allow for his third term re-election. At the foundation stone ceremony, Tandja was celebrated by an impressive crowd composed mainly of youths, who welcomed Tandja with *Tazartché* t-shirts and slogans. *Tazartché* was portrayed as a spontaneous social movement that was initiated by the youth of Zinder because Tandja had opted for Zinder as the site of the oil refinery. Apart from this official portrayal, I suppose that Tandja had chosen Zinder as location for the oil refinery because he wanted to bring his coalition partner, the CDS-Rahama of Mahamane Ousmane, into the political project for constitutional change. Mahamane Ousmane originates from Zinder. From here, the CDS-Rahama had emerged during the transition to a multi-party system in the early 1990s as an eastern Nigerien response to historical western Nigerien and Zarma dominance (Lund 2001), and it is in Zinder that the party still has its electoral stronghold. Tandja attempted to pressure Ousmane into participating in his campaign for constitutional change via the threat of losing this electoral stronghold. However, Tandja failed. As a reaction to *Tazartché*, the political elite in Niger firmly united against the attempt at constitutional change and called on the international community for sanctions against Tandja's regime. Ousmane did not participate within Tandja's political campaign but opted out of the government coalition between the political parties MNSD-Nassara of Tandja and his own CDS, and subsequently became one of the leading forces against *Tazartché*.

On 18 February 2010, in a tense political situation when international sanctions were enacted against Niger, Tandja was overthrown by a military coup led by Commander Salou Djibo. This was well before the first barrel of oil had been produced. Salou Djibo claimed that his aim was to turn Niger into an example of democracy and good governance. Within one year of his reign Djibo organized new elections that saw the former political opposition (PNDS-Tarayya and MODEN FA Lumana) come to power, in the person of Mahamadou Issoufou. When newly elected President Mahamadou Issoufou came to Zinder to hold the oil refinery's inauguration ceremony in late 2011 in the electoral stronghold of the new political opposition (CDS-Rahama and MNSD-Nassara), the same youths that had been celebrating Tandja at the oil refinery's foundation stone ceremony in late 2008 were now violently protesting against the arrival of the new President.

## Crude politics

The oil refinery's opening ceremony on 28 November 2011 in Zinder became the theatre in which these pre-existing political conflicts were played out. Diverse political actors like the regional and municipal councilors of Zinder, government representatives, opposition politicians, businessmen, civil society activists and youths engaged in talking oil politics by releasing press statements via private radio stations and organizing radio debates or engaged in the texting of chain messages via mobile phones. Furthermore, two weeks before the refinery's inauguration, the government announced the future official Nigerien fuel price of 579 CFA francs per liter (0.88 Euros) by a press conference of the minister of oil and energy. Although the price was a reduction to the former fuel price of over 600 CFA francs (0.91 Euros), a new trend of mass messaging spread rapidly among the population, especially the youth of Zinder. These short messages in Hausa and French were sent from unidentified SIM cards and called on the population to resist and fight the government. In these short messages organizing the



public, places in Zinder were renamed after historic places in the ‘Arab Spring’ like Tahrir Square. Some days before the refinery’s inauguration, these messages called on the population to boycott the presidential arrival for the inauguration ceremony. The day of the opening ceremony, youths violently demonstrated against the arrival of new Nigerian President Mahamadou Issoufou. They built burning street barricades out of tires and fuel, clashed with the police and attacked the festive procession of the president on its way to the refinery. After the refinery’s inauguration, the riots were glorified in the short messages as resistance against Issoufou and a profession of faith for former Nigerian President Mamadou Tandja. Equally the arrest of a rich businessman, civil society activists and politician in Zinder called Dan Dubai<sup>2</sup> some days before the refinery’s inauguration took centre stage in these messages where he was more and more presented as a ‘folk hero’. On the day of Dan Dubai’s jurisdiction, the short messages called on the population to assist the court case. After his court case followed three days of disorder in which youths fought with security forces in the streets, burned down police stations, destroyed traffic lights and robbed and burned an ECOBANK branch. The messages added fuel to the fire by diffusing misinformation like ‘100 police cars are on their way from Niamey to Zinder to massacre the *Zinderois*<sup>3</sup>. The government responded with the temporary shutdown of the entire SMS network in Zinder and used the state owned media station *Office du Radiodiffusion Télévision du Niger* (ORTN) to announce the initial measures: the dismissal of executive police officers, a visit of Prime Minister Birgi Rafini in Zinder and the convening of a commission to uncover the puppet masters of the riots. On 8 December 2011, the Prime Minister arrived at the Sultanate in Zinder and met with the Sultan, the governor, the pupils and student organization *Union des Scolaires Nigériens* (USN), the Parent Teacher Association and high religious authorities. After their meeting the religious authorities sent an appeal to the population to calm down. Following the appeal, the situation in Zinder remained calm, albeit tense.

In the following, I will describe the different political actors’ public involvement before, during, and after the oil refinery’s inauguration, detail their positions, projects and practices in the political arena of Zinder and reveal their hidden transcripts.

### The *élus locaux* in Zinder

On 24 October 2011, the regional and municipal councilors – most of them were from the political parties CDS-Rahama and MNSD-Nassara that were forming the new opposition at the national level but that in Zinder still had the political majority<sup>4</sup> – released a press statement concerning the potential risks of a social explosion due to the oil refinery’s imminent inauguration that was set for 28 November 2011. Shortly before the press statement, the government had announced the nominations of the nine directors of SORAZ (*Société de la Raffinerie à Zinder*), none of whom originated from Zinder region. With the future recruitment of more than 300 posts at SORAZ, the regional and municipal councilors saw the social equilibrium of Zinder in danger. According

2 Dan Dubai is Hausa language and means ‘Son of Dubai’.

3 *Zinderois* is the common denomination for the population of Zinder.

4 The town council of Zinder was installed in June 2011 by universal suffrage and is composed of 23 elected councilors. Five political parties are represented within the council (number of seats): CDS 14; MNSD 4; PNDS 2; ARD 2; Lumana 1. The regional council was equally installed in June 2011 by universal suffrage and is composed of 41 elected councilors, 8 administrative chiefs (‘traditional authorities’) and 20 deputies. Seven political parties are represented within the council (number of seats): CDS 12; MNSD 8; PNDS 9; ARD 5; Lumana 3; RPD 2; RSD 2. The results show the dominance of CDS (and MNSD) in Zinder.

to them, high youth unemployment had already contributed to the creation of male-dominated youth gangs (*palais palais*) who were well known for committing crimes in Zinder. If western Nigerien belonging and Zarma ethnicity were favored in the recruitment process, they predicted social unrest would ensue. Thus, they installed a regional committee to observe the recruitment process. With this press release and the installation of a regional committee to supervise the recruitment process they gave the starting signal for politics of naming, blaming and claiming.

At the time of their press release, the construction phase of the oil refinery was nearly completed and the refinery ready for inauguration. In the operational phase of oil production, unskilled workers are no longer needed. They had been heavily recruited as roustabouts in the construction phase, but by the time of the press release, they were already experiencing mass layoffs. Instead of unskilled workers, only about 300 highly qualified young university graduates in petro-chemistry and mechanics are needed for maintenance, surveillance and refining in the operational phase. Although there are unemployed young university graduates in Zinder, they have little association with the well-known criminals organized in *palais palais*. The regional committee supervising the recruitment process in order to guarantee the recruitment of *Zinderois* thus did not intend to include the youth gangs. Instead, education, especially university education, in Niger is still a matter of funds and therefore reserved for the country's elite. The supervisory committee that was installed would therefore first of all guarantee their own children and then extended family members access to job opportunities at SORAZ. In addition, the link between the nomination of directors at SORAZ and youth gangs seems farfetched. The distribution of directorial positions is a matter of political affiliation. Claiming these posts for *Zinderois* means that it is first of all the locally elected representatives (*élus locaux*) from within the government majority who will be rewarded with these positions. However, by extending their fate to the common destiny of the whole population of Zinder region, they were able to name the distribution of directorial positions as a collective injury. In so doing, they blamed the incumbent government in the name of Zinder's population, masking their claims to individual gains behind a pretense of regional ones.

Shortly afterwards, the first nominations were cancelled and the directorial positions newly redistributed. Three posts were distributed to persons originating from Diffa region (the site of oil extraction) and three of the nine posts were assigned to persons originating from Zinder region (the site of oil refinement) who were part of the government majority. A member of the political party MODEN FA-Lumana became Deputy Managing Director at SORAZ (*DG adjoint SORAZ*) and the regional president of PNDS-Tarayya became Public Relations Manager (*Directeur de Relation publique SORAZ*). It is these two political parties who form the governing majority, but those locally elected representatives from the political opposition also profited from the regionalized job distribution as their children were the first to occupy the 300 highly qualified positions at SORAZ. As one agent of SORAZ observed:

*“Locally elected representatives made a press statement and organized several debates on radio and TV Gaskia to protest against the non-recruitment of young people from Zinder. The Chinese understood and took their children. Since then, the Chinese have had their peace” (agent of SORAZ, June 2013 quoted in Harouna 2014, own translation).*

As shown by this example, the purported political representation of unemployed youth is an ideological tool that masks individual gains as political projects for the common good and serves to legitimate the political positions of the *élus locaux*. Political representation thereby

reinforces structures of inequality and subordination as the first to profit from the oil industry were political actors and their families and not socially deprived groups like unemployed youth.

### **An amalgamation of business, civil society and political party: Dan Dubai and the MPPAD**

On 2 November 2011, the civil society association *Mouvement Populaire pour la Pérennisation des Actions du Développement* (MPPAD) followed the regional and municipal councils by issuing a declaration in Zinder. In this declaration, the MPPAD celebrated former President Mamadou Tandja as the father of oil production in Niger whose ‘pragmatism’, ‘patriotism’ and ‘nationalism’ had allowed Niger to become an oil producer. The civil society association accused the newly elected government authorities of bad governance and of marginalizing the region of Zinder with respect to possible oil benefits. The MPPAD harshly rejected the nominations of positions of responsibility at SORAZ that it judged ‘sectarian’, ‘ethnic’ and ‘politically motivated’ and asked the minister of oil to recall them. Finally their declaration called upon the population to mobilize against the government in power.

The president of the MPPAD is Dan Dubai – a rich businessman who earned his money as a broker in the Dubai oil business. After living many years in Dubai, he returned to Niger in 2007; that is, after ESSO and PETRONAS had abandoned the Agadem oil block in 2006 but before the Nigerien government under Mamadou Tandja reached a production sharing agreement with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in 2008. Dan Dubai is regarded in Niger as the founding father of *Tazartché* – a political campaign of former President Mamadou Tandja to change the constitution in order to allow him to remain in office beyond the constitutional two-term limit. At the oil refinery’s foundation stone ceremony on 27 October 2008 Dan Dubai had mobilized masses of the rural and urban population of Zinder region to give Mamadou Tandja a glamorous reception at his arrival in Zinder. This day marked the launch of the political campaign *Tazartché*. In his speech at the cornerstone ceremony the governor of Zinder, Yahaya Yandaka, asked Tandja in the name of the whole Nigerien population to remain in office in order to complete the great construction projects (and especially those for oil production) that Tandja had initiated during his presidential office. It was in this campaign that Dan Dubai founded the civil society association MPPAD in order to speak in the name of the Nigerien population for Tandja to remain in office. He also became a member of MNSD-Nassara, the political party of Mamadou Tandja.

It seems obvious that Dan Dubai would have been rewarded after the successful constitutional change of 2009 with either a foothold in the Nigerien oil business or a position in the Nigerien government, if Tandja had not been removed from office only some months later, in 2010, in a military coup led by Commander Salou Djibo. The military coup, however, left Dan Dubai empty-handed. After Salou Djibo organized new elections in 2011 that saw former opposition leader Mahamadou Issoufou come to power, Dan Dubai became a member of the political opposition. Rich businessmen who supported Issoufou’s electoral campaign, on the other hand, had by 2011–12 formed an oligopoly in the Nigerien oil and transport business.

The declaration of the MPPAD thus has to be considered as a political project to delegitimize the governing majority. Dan Dubai’s financial leverage and ability to mobilize the population of Zinder against the incumbent government represented a real threat to the new political authorities. Thus he was arrested shortly before the refinery’s inauguration for inciting social unrest. His arrest nevertheless only helped to present him further as a ‘folk hero’ who dared to speak in the name of the poor. His arrest equally helped to incite social unrest during and after the

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refinery's opening ceremony when youths protested violently on the streets of Zinder against the new Issoufou government. At least some of the short messages were sent by members of the MPPAD. It is therefore no surprise that Dan Dubai and Mamadou Tandja took centre stage in these messages, which called on the population to incite social unrest. Dan Dubai was provisionally co-opted into the Issoufou government in 2014 and temporarily withdrew from public politics. After considering his non-party candidacy for presidential election in 2016, he finally opted to support Mahamane Ousmane from Zinder as presidential candidate.

### **A divided civil society: regime loyalists and opponents in the conquest for daily allowances and 'envelopes'**

On 16 October 2011 a group of activists from civil society associations and labor unions met to form a new civil society structure that would regroup as many civil society associations and labor unions as possible under a single umbrella organization that they later on called CRAS (*Comité Régional des Associations et Syndicats de la région de Zinder*). The MPPAD of Dan Dubai was formally not part of CRAS. Nevertheless, one of its members became the vice-president of CRAS under the name of a different civil society association<sup>5</sup> and the general secretary of the MPPAD frequented CRAS and tried to influence and coordinate their political maneuvers. On my way to the kickoff meeting I met a well known civil society activist just in front of the meeting place. Earlier in the morning of the same day, he had come to my house to give me an interview about his vision of the role of Niger's civil society in the upcoming oil future of the country. There he explained that the task of Niger's civil society should be the sensitization of the population especially of the violence-prone youth and the expropriated rural population in close cooperation with the government authorities to guarantee social peace and stability and to turn the oil exploitation into a blessing. In this interview he repeatedly stressed the good relationship between the civil society and the government authorities and noted that he is heavily implicated in several governmental committees like the organizational committee for the oil refinery's inauguration ceremony and is therefore always around at the governorate. Yet later that day, when I asked him if he will participate in the kickoff meeting, he sharply retorted: "These are the people of Tazartché. We don't do politics. We are not involved. In any case!"

At this time, I did not really understand what he was referring to and was thus surprised that he had dissociated himself so sharply from the civil society activists gathered at the meeting place. During our interview in the morning he had claimed to speak in the name of the whole civil society, but during the meeting I realized that the committee members of CRAS were taking exactly the opposite position from the activist I had met at the entrance. Although oil production had not yet started they were already naming all the negative (travelling) images of oil production like environmental pollution, conflicts and the failure of infrastructural projects and social development in terms of better access to health services, water and education. Whereas the activist at the entrance had emphasized his good relationship with the government authorities, CRAS as a body heavily blamed the government for being corrupt and incompetent. Finally, they claimed that they should become members of regional government committees like the committee to supervise the recruitment process that had been installed by the *élus locaux*, the committee to determine the future fuel price that had been set up by the government

5 In Niger many civil society activists are member of several different civil society associations at the same time.

or the organizational committee for the refinery's inauguration: precisely the positions the other activist claimed to occupy. Furthermore, the absence of some civil society associations at the meeting place was commented on by one attendee with the statement that they are 'unjust people who betrayed the civil society of Zinder'. CRAS' stated objective was to counteract what they saw as infiltration and sabotage of civil society by the state. They blamed the civil society activists that were members in governmental committees for only "eating, drinking, applauding and dispersing afterwards" and thus to give their blessings to everything the government proposes. CRAS instead portrayed themselves as defending the interests of Zinder region against the national government and their regional representatives, such as the governor.

Here it is important to note that *Tazartché* led to a division of Niger's civil society into supporters of *Tazartché* (so called Tazartchists) and opponents who joined the political opposition in their international call for democracy. Tandja rewarded his supporters with political posts in governmental committees or envelopes of money.<sup>6</sup> When Tandja was overthrown by the military coup and the former opposition came to power, those civil society associations, from within governmental bodies, that had supported *Tazartché* were removed and replaced by civil society associations that were formerly fighting hand in hand with new President Issoufou against *Tazartché*. CRAS was left empty-handed after the military coup in 2010 and therefore used the opportunity of regional and national attention that surrounded the oil refinery's inauguration to regroup in order to restore the political visibility they had lost and to press for a renewed incorporation into the government and for the distribution of envelopes.

It is equally important to note another interesting side effect of this regional membership: being part of the committee is remunerated by daily allowances, a benefit that is highly sought-after in a context of low income and its likely redistribution within social networks. The civil society associations forming the committee in Zinder thus saw a new chance of reclaiming the political posts that they had lost during the regime change from Tandja to Issoufou by voicing popular grievances. In addition, CRAS also claimed to get an audience with President Mahamadou Issoufou when he arrived to inaugurate the oil refinery, supposedly in order to deliver a list of worries and demands they had developed. Yet here again, audiences with prominent government members are widely believed to be occasions for envelopes of money to be handed over. The refinery's inauguration was thus a perfect stage to (re)engage in the public political game.

### The sultan, religious authorities and the government

In an interview that sultan Aboubacar Oumarou Sanda accorded to *Le Damagaram*, the only regional newspaper of Zinder, on 16 May 2012 he stated that he had by now repeated his opinion several times that the government and SORAZ needed to a) revisit their fuel price policy in order to permit the consumption of these products by the population, and b) make employment opportunities for the youth of Zinder a priority. He then emphasized that there are presently youths who undertake awareness raising campaigns in the different city quarters to guarantee social peace. Just one month earlier, the youth had demonstrated in Zinder against

6 In a corruption affair of CRAS some month later, in which three leading activists were said to have received envelopes from government authorities in order to abandon their organization of mass protests against the government, the accusations did not aim at the taking of money but at its redistribution among all members of CRAS. In accusing the three leading activists, one of the members of CRAS said that when Tandja distributed envelopes for supporting *Tazartché*, he equally shared the money among all of them.



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water shortage. The sultan publicly judged this demonstration as a political manipulation of the opposition which brought upon him the accusation from the political opposition of being an *homme politique*.

Here we have to know that Zinder has been a sultanate since the 18th century. The sultan of Zinder has always played an important role in the political arena of Zinder. In 2001, under former President Mamadou Tandja, Sultan Aboubacar Oumarou Sanda was deposed and sentenced to two years of prison after being accused of fraud, receipt of stolen goods and drug trafficking. Political observers in Niger assert that his dismissal was due to the fact that he is a member of PNDJ-Tarraya, the political party of former opposition leader and now President Mahamadou Issoufou. Mamadou Tandja instead installed El Hadji Mahamadou Moustapha as the new Sultan of Zinder who is said to be a member of CDS-Rahama, the political party of then President of the National Assembly Mahamane Ousmane and coalition partner of Tandja's MNSD-Nassara in the government until Ousmane dropped out of government in 2009. Aboubacar Oumarou Sanda was reinstated under new President Issoufou in July 2011 shortly after coming to power in April. He thus has to maneuver between regional politics, through which he aims at the population's support in a context of Zinder being the opposition stronghold (especially of the CDS-Rahama), and politics in favor of the government (to whom he owes his reinstatement).

The religious authorities of Zinder kept silent in the run-up to the oil refinery's inauguration and did not engage in the public political game, either by participating in radio debates or by releasing press statements. However, this changed when youths caused public uproar during and after the refinery's inauguration ceremony. The prime minister was subsequently sent to Zinder on 8 December 2011 to meet with the Sultan, the governor, the pupils and student organization *Union des Scolaires Nigériens* (USN), the Parent Teacher Association and high religious authorities at the sultanate in Zinder. After their meeting the religious authorities sent an appeal to the population to calm down. They forgave the subversive youth in the name of the entire population, calling it a one-off event, an accident, and stressing that the uproar was over. Following the appeal, the situation in Zinder remained calm but nevertheless tense. Afterwards information was leaked to the public that the prime minister had distributed money to the different representatives present at the meeting. It is reported that the religious authorities and the parent teacher association received each one million CFA francs (1524 Euros). The USN received 300,000 CFA francs (457 Euros).

As Sebastian Elischer (2015) shows, access to the religious sphere in Niger continues after its democratization to be heavily regulated by the *Conseil Islamique du Niger* (CIN) – a successor organization of the *Association Islamique du Niger* (AIN) that was a key organizational entity during the autocratic period in Niger (1974–1991), charged with the supervision of the daily practice of Islam.<sup>7</sup> This state influence on Islamic associations in Niger shapes the articulation of the new oil reality by religious authorities. Their close relationship to the state pushes them to speak of oil in Niger as a manna that will bless Niger but that the whole Nigerien population cannot benefit from it at once. They thus demand the population to be patient in order that everyone might have their share.

This narrative blends well with the official position of the government. In a radio debate about the future prospects of the Nigerien oil refinery that was organized in the run-up to the oil refinery's inauguration by a private radio station called *Radio Anfani* in Zinder, the

7 He continues to argue that religious supervision by the state has contained Jihadi Salafism in Niger (ibid.).

invited guests were Mahamandou Dan Buzuwa from the political party MODEN FA-Lumana (i. e. a member of the government), Adoullahim Balarabé alias Babi from CDS-Rahama (i. e. a member of the political opposition but at the same time town councilor of Zinder) and Aboubacar Mounkaila, a.k.a. Dan Dubai of the MPPAD. Whereas Babi and Dan Dubai repeated their positions that I explained in length above, Mahamandou Dan Buzuwa as a member of the government explicitly referred to the ‘resource curse’ to demand the population to remain calm in order to let the oil production turn into a blessing. He thereby implicitly accused the ethnic and regional populism of the political opposition and the civil society for being responsible if the ‘curse’ indeed comes true.

Signifying oil in this way is related to the political conflict that emerged with *Tazartché*. The same argument that was stressed by the member of the government was made prior to this by Tandja when he was still president. Tandja also asked the population to stay calm; oil would come and everyone would get a piece of it. Furthermore, in a speech made in the Eastern region of Diffa, Tandja portrayed Niger’s oil production as god’s blessing and claimed he saw the completion of the oil project as both his duty and lifework. He thus linked divine providence in Islam to his personal destiny. When Mamadou Tandja was overthrown in a military coup led by Commander Salou Djibo in 2010, Salou Djibo justified the coup with a return to ‘good governance’ and ‘democracy’. When Mahamadou Issoufou came to power one year later in political elections, he drew heavily on the model of the resource curse in his inaugural speech. Building on the idea that ‘bad governance’ is the root cause of resource conflicts, he tried to assure an international audience of his commitment to ‘good governance’ and ‘transparency’ in the resource sector in order to avoid the resource curse becoming a reality. This ‘extroverted’ translation of the resource curse model by Issoufou that targets an international audience in a ‘bazaar situation’ of tapping international financial flows thus follows the logic of liberal global governmentality.<sup>8</sup> However, Mahamadou Dan Buzuwa had in the radio debate referred to this conception of the resource curse in order to question the legitimacy of political opposition.

### Urban youth: the ‘critical mass’ to govern

The urban youth hardly have a voice in Niger’s public political game. Their primary import is discursive, as a “generation at risk” due to “the correlation between young men and violence” (Masquelier 2010, 236). We saw this discursive construction especially in the press statement of the *élus locaux* who used the scenario of youth violence to claim political posts and highly qualified jobs at SORAZ for themselves and their family members. The situation of youth in Niger is one of mass unemployment. Those who find jobs are mostly motor taxi drivers (*kabou kabou*) or small street fuel vendors. During the oil refinery’s construction phase they were also heavily recruited as roustabouts. In everyday life, their main activity is the preparation of tea in conversation groups called *fada* in a situation of unemployment and boredom (Masquelier 2013). In contrast to *fada*, the youth gangs called *palais palais* are additionally about drug

8 I here follow Bayart’s (2009) notion of ‘extraversion’ as one characteristic of the African state. However, as I show throughout the article, the African state is also ‘introverted’. Depending on the ‘bazaar situation’, the political reality in African states is therefore characterized by ‘code switching’ (Rottenburg 2005) or to put it differently by ‘introverted’ and ‘extroverted translation’.

consumption, violence and girls after dark<sup>9</sup>. All their economic activities are heavily related to oil, the lifeblood of urban Africa. Therefore the future Nigerien fuel price was at the core of the public political debate. Political players such as civil society activists, *élus locaux*, Dan Dubai and politicians all drew heavily on the fuel price. As political opponents, they argued according to a social logic of redistribution by which, with the beginning of oil refinement in Niger, fuel becomes a national product that has to be subsidized for the public good. Yet as members of the political majority, they argued according to an economic logic that SORAZ is a company that needs to make profits, and that the fuel price in Niger is both lower than before and already the lowest in West Africa (Tidjani Alou 2013).

But the youth are also aware of this discourse and appropriate the rhetoric of a ‘ticking time bomb’ (Masquelier 2010, 236). Through their performance of ‘violent masculinity’ in protests (Langa and Kiguwa 2013) they are able to gain public visibility. Due to the country’s demography (75% of the Nigerien population are under 25 years of age) the young population has become an inescapable force in Nigerien politics. They are the ‘critical mass’ that has to be governed and controlled. Thus they have become target of mobilization politics to rally either behind the government majority or the political opposition. Especially Dan Dubai was able to mobilize the youth first for the refinery’s cornerstone ceremony to support then President Mamadou Tandja and later for the refinery’s inauguration to contest the regime of new President Mahamaodu Issoufou. He organized the urban youth in so-called *comité de défense* – youth groups in every quarter of Zinder city – of which the leader was attached to the MPPAD from which he received orders that he passed down to his peers.

The urban youth hardly have access to Niger’s radio landscape in order to participate in public political game. Although private radio stations allow for the release of press statements or the organization of radio debates for political actors, the youth are not included in this kind of broadcasting format but instead denied access. Their voice on the radio is limited to open-line radio shows. The most popular and infamous talk-back radio program among the youth in Zinder is *planète reggae*. This radio program of private radio station *Radio Shukurah* is broadcast once a week on Fridays from 23:00 pm to 24.00 pm. In between reggae songs, the youth call in to talk about all sorts of life issues in Zinder including politics. In the emission of 9 December 2011, the first emission just after the riots from 6 to 8 December 2011, youths called in to blame the political authorities and their ‘bad governance’ for the happenings in Zinder. Some drew comparison to Kaddafi’s Libya to say that the political authorities of Niger ‘did not even do one percent of the good governance that did Kaddafi in Libya’. Here we need to know that Kaddafi’s Libya was viewed extremely positively in Niger for Kaddafi’s distribution of the country’s oil wealth to the Libyan population<sup>10</sup> and because of Libya being the first country of Nigerien immigration. Others even called for violence and threatened the political authorities of ‘making *Boko Haram*’.

Displeased by the youth’s statements on the radio show *planète reggae*, the government tried to stop the youth from publicly intervening on the radio. A rich businessman of Zinder from within the governmental clientelist network approached a member of CRAS who was also a good friend of the radio moderator of *planète reggae* to make the radio moderator stop broadcasting youth statements publicly. The member of CRAS told me that he took the envelope

9 In Zinder, there are about 320 informal youth groupings called *fada* or *palais* of which the majority of 72,5% is strictly masculine, 10,3% consist uniquely of women and 17,2% declare themselves to be mixed (Souley 2012, 10).

10 Vandewalle (1998) has called Libya a ‘distributive state’.



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of 20,000 CFA francs (30 Euros) but did not talk to his friend the radio moderator, because, being equally a youth leader himself, he wanted the youth to have at least a voice. *Planète reggae* thus continued to broadcast as before.

Having been at the forefront of the riots in December 2011, the youth of Zinder gained political leverage and became addressees of government policies. The riots thus endowed the rebellious youth with new instruments of power in the political arena. In order to avoid riots and other uprisings, the government addressed the youth by creating formal structures that could be more easily governed by political authorities. Between May and June 2012 the *Mouvement de Fada et Palais pour la Promotion des Jeunes* (MFPPJ) was founded on the initiative of local political authorities and the Sultan. Shortly afterwards the MFPPJ declared their support for the government and President Mahamadou Issoufou and dissociated themselves from the MPPAD of Dan Doubai, whom they named as being responsible for the incidents which took place in Zinder between 6 and 8 December 2011 by organizing demonstrations in a 'politically anarchist way'. When Mahamadou Issoufou came to Zinder a second time for the foundation stone ceremony of a road, he was overwhelmingly received by large audience that was said to have been even bigger than the audience receiving Mamadou Tandja for the foundation stone ceremony of the oil refinery and the launching of *Tazartché*.

### **The subaltern: expropriated rural farmers and women**

Expropriated rural farmers hardly have a voice in the public political game but depend on lawyers and the civil society to defend their cause, or on journalists who want to make a radio show out of their situation. I am aware of one radio interview with two expropriated rural farmers in 2011. In this radio interview, the two farmers displayed their sufferings and appealed to the President of Niger for help. They said that they were always told that their compensation payments had already been transferred but that they do not know who will hand the payments over to them. Two lawyers started to deal with the farmers' legal claim to compensation payments in 2011. As the rural farmers had no means to pay for it, their legal representation was granted at the lawyer's own initiative, his earnings being 19 percent of the indemnity payments in the case of a positive outcome. One of them was once a famous civil society activist during the movements against the 'high costs of living' in 2005 and had close relations with the leaders of CRAS. During a meeting of CRAS in 2012, one of the members was informed via mobile phone that one of the expropriated farmers was in Zinder. So CRAS sent one committee member to pick him up, after which he was requested to report on the situation of expropriated rural farmers near the oil refinery. After his report he was released from the meeting while the members of CRAS continued to discuss whether they could use his information in their political struggle. In the end, the farmer's grievances had no impact on the political agenda of CRAS. When the expropriated farmers received their second of three compensation payments in 2014, only part of the money arrived at the beneficiaries. The lawyer, having close relations with CRAS, was accused of embezzlement and arrested by the police. Members of CRAS however claimed a political motive for his arrest and demanded his initial release. Through all this conflict, the expropriated farmers did not have a voice.

Women, so it seems, have even less of a voice in the public political game. As we have seen throughout the politics of naming, blaming, claiming in the political arena of Zinder, political claims have never been gendered and none of the political actors that engaged in the public

political game were women.<sup>11</sup> All members of CRAS were men although two to three times a woman appeared at the meeting. Each time she arrived, the members of CRAS smiled while greeting her. She never engaged in the discussion and left each time only some minutes after arrival. In addition, claiming directorial positions for regional residents at SORAZ or a regional quota for oil workers only implicates men and male youths as both the directors and oil workers were exclusively male. Thus, in the public political game in Niger, gender becomes unspoken and invisible due to existing structures of domination in a patriarchal setting. Male political players in Zinder claim to speak in the name of the whole population of Zinder region, although in so doing implying only representation of men. Voices of women seem to be simply non-existent in the Zinder's political arena.

These examples show that the subaltern has no direct access to the public political sphere but need paternalistic representatives in order to speak (Spivak 1988), be they lawyers, civil society activists or journalists. These paternalistic representatives thereby translate the testimonies of the subaltern into their own political projects and change their statements in a way that suits their own agendas.

### The politics of naming, blaming and claiming in oil-age Niger

The emergence of a multi-party system in Niger in the early 1990s enabled the oil talk to take place in a setting of political competition. It is this setting of political competition in multi-party systems in which speech acts of *naming*, *blaming* and *claiming* (Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1980–1981) are part of 'democratic' moves.<sup>12</sup> As Felstiner, Abel and Sarat (ibid.) argue, disputes develop through three stages: it is first a perceived injurious experience (*naming*) that is attributed to the fault of another (*blaming*) to then ask for some remedy (*claiming*). Here, *named* oil related grievances are used to *blame* the political opponent in order to *claim* political legitimacy.

Elisabeth L. Church (2010) developed an heuristic analysis for the rhetoric of *blame* using Aristotle's epideictic oratory and identifying three main rhetoric strategies: the establishment of place, the creation of ethos and the use of *ekphrasis*.<sup>13</sup> The establishment of place enables the interaction of orator and audience, the creation of an ethos defines an epistemic and moral authority for the self and the other and the use of *ekphrasis* rhetorically unveils an event in order to effect a call to action in the audience (ibid.). The oil talk is diffused by private radio stations with regionally limited transmitter range and therefore is exclusively aimed at a regional audience. The epistemic and oral authority is constructed around oil knowledge and notions of 'good governance'. It is striking how important the notion of the resource curse has become to the 'democratic' moves of naming, blaming and claiming. It either serves to delegitimize the political position of the government by accusing them of letting the resource curse become a reality or to legitimize the government in power by accusing the political opposition of the very

11 At the national level there are some exceptions to this rule and civil society associations do have female members or even female presidents like GREN or Transparency International based at Niger's capital Niamey. This is especially true for those civil society associations that have Western donors who promote gender equality. Yet in Zinder where most of the civil society organizations are 'introverted' rather than 'extroverted' in the sense of Bayart (2009) and cash flows thus being limited to daily allowances and 'envelopes', women mostly remain outside the public political sphere.

12 I am grateful to Nikolaus Schareika who drew my attention to the concept of naming, blaming and claiming.

13 I am grateful to Klaus Schlichte who drew my attention to Aristotle's epideictic oratory.

production of the curse itself. The oil talk closes with calls to (non)action, either to rally against the government or to stay calm in order to let oil production turn into a blessing.

These significations are part and parcel of the new reality of oil that is being constructed. That is to say, the oil talk is part of a cosmopolitan setting in which political players produce narratives about oil in Niger by translating travelling ideas like the resource curse to the particular situation of Niger becoming an oil producing state. Significations of oil thus circulate as the forms that political players use in their narrations to make political claims. As politics in general is inherently about conflicts (Schlichte 2012) and multi-party systems in particular about the negotiation of disputes in the public political sphere, it seems that political narratives are structured according to the three stages of *naming*, *blaming* and *claiming*.

However, it also seems that political actors use travelling ideas in a very selective way that suits their political programs. In other words, travelling ideas are creatively adapted by local political actors in a particular context of political competition. In this case, this is a multi-party system in which the narration of a new oil reality is politically structured according to the players' political scripts. It is thus the political players' scripts that shape the very enactment of practices of *naming*, *blaming*, and *claiming* on the public political stage. The political scripts, in turn, are ordered according to the actors' positioning within particular political constellations and power games. Therefore, I transfer the concept of *naming*, *blaming* and *claiming* in legal disputes (as employed by Felstiner et al. 1980–1981) into a political setting and reformulate it to speak of *politics of naming*, *blaming* and *claiming* in order to emphasize that political disputes emerge not simply out of injurious experiences such as environmental pollution that then translate into further stages of blaming and claiming as Felstiner *et al.* would have it. Instead, politically named grievances are anticipated, invented, paternalistically ascribed and expressed; they are staged, transformed or discarded to serve the players' political agenda. Whereas the expropriated rural population around the oil refinery and the unskilled oil workers are too marginalized to voice their oil related grievances in the public political game, we have seen how in the context of political disputes around oil in Zinder various political players like politicians, businessmen and civil society activists act as paternalistic representatives who stage significations of oil in the supposed name of the subaltern.

In contrast to an extroverted translation of the resource curse that follows the logic of de-politicization, the introverted translation of the resource curse model into the local political arena through epideictic oratory is used for the politicization of every aspects of oil production. One may therefore argue that in a multi-party setting characterized by a crude logic of political competition, *oil talk* becomes *crude talking*.

### **Media technologies, travelling ideas and the how of politics in Niger**

It is important to not only scrutinize the content but also the technologies through which oil talk is conveyed. The public political debate shows that politics are played through media technologies like mobile phones, newspapers, radio and television. It was with the adoption of the multiparty system in Niger in 1993 that the state monopoly of newspapers, radio and television was abandoned to guarantee by law the freedom and independence of the media. Private radio stations in particular have become an important resource in Zinder's political arena after their appearance in 1997 that allow political actors to release press statements or to organize radio debates for small amounts of money. The radio thus not only diffuses significations of oil, but has itself become a crucial element for the way in which political negotiations and

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power struggles proceed. In this way, the oil talk is *enacted* by the relations of an actor-network (Latour 2007) of media technologies and political players in a context of political competition in a multiparty system.

In a recent review article on the anthropology of the radio, Bessire and Fisher (2013) show that the radio was celebrated by some as ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ and is therefore seen as a democratizing vehicle due to its empowering and emancipating potential for the subaltern, whereas others have taken a critical stance and pointed to the radio as a governmental and disciplining instrument by which the state could consolidate its power. My example showed that the technology of the radio is neither liberating nor enslaving. Instead, the radio represents a contested social field in which different political actors try to use radio broadcasts for their political projects. In addition, I showed that in the case of Zinder’s public political sphere the radio does not simply give voice to the voiceless but that the subaltern hardly have access to radio broadcasts and if so only mediated by paternalistic representatives who translate grievances of the subaltern into their own political projects and thus change them.

As with the case of radio, other ICTs have gained momentum in Africa. The mobile phone revolution in Africa has transformed the lives of millions of Africans (Etzo and Collender 2010). In the last few years, (particularly in response to the ‘Arab Spring’) much debate has arisen about the impact and causes of ICTs in contentious politics, social movements and revolutionary events. As Heeks and Seo-Zindy (2013, 3–8) show in a short literature review of ICTs and social movements under authoritarian regimes, the debate is characterized by a double-layered narrative: On the one hand, the impacts associated with ICTs oscillate between optimism and pessimism. On the other hand, the causes of impacts associated with ICTs vary between ‘technological determinism’ and ‘social determinism’, the narrative of technological determinism thereby being the dominant one (ibid.). In Niger, as in other African contexts, the mobile phone has become an instrument of political agitation that changed the nature of the public political game. The anonymity possible when texting via unregistered SIM cards allowed for new forms of organizing, mobilizing and leading massed groups. In addition, access to the radio as mouthpiece is more restricted, being controlled by journalists and financial flows. Texting, on the other hand, has allowed a more uncontrolled form of dissemination. There is a qualitative difference between the technology of the radio and that of the mobile phone. However, my case study showed that ICTs are also shaped by society and politics. Thus, instead of celebrating ICTs for new forms of democratic activism as it has often and prominently been the case in the ‘Arab Spring’, it seems that the same applies for mobile phones as for the radio: it is not said whether and which social and political actors will be able to translate the new media into their political programs. My case study showed that what seemed at first place being ‘politics from below’ were instead as well ‘politics from above’ in that the text messages were designed by influential political players to mobilize the population against the government. However, their transmission and dissemination depended on the choice of the youth to forward the messages to their electronic directory. Their political agitation has to be situated in a context of waiting, boredom, violent masculinity and political disaffection and alienation I described above.

Furthermore, one problem with analyses that celebrate an emancipatory potential of new media is that they tend to make up a dichotomy between the state on the one hand and civil society or social movements on the other, thereby portraying the latter as democratizing forces against an autocratic or repressive state. This normative and moral framework of social movements or civil society that entails positive connotations of political progress, legitimate grievances and a better social order is misleading (Mamdani 1995; Macamo 2011). Instead, as my example has shown, the civil society engagement is embedded into the same structures that

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shape their political opponents. In this way, democratic values are first appropriated to acquire political legitimacy and do not signal emancipatory politics *per se*. Moreover, the example shows that both civil society associations and social movements are hybrid in their very nature, characterized by co-optation, bribery and corruption (Waal and Ibreck 2013).

Only by considering the coproduction of media technologies and politics in Niger, understanding the specific character of local political dynamics of oil is possible. In this sense, media technologies have not only become important devices in the political players' tactical repertoire but also shaped the 'how' of playing politics in Niger.

### Conclusion: situating politics, enacting oil talk

According to the resource curse model, oil is said to provoke conflicts. However, as several authors have argued, oil enters into a political arena that is already well structured and of which political conflicts are an integral part (Reyna and Behrends 2008; Behrends, Reyna, and Schlee 2011; Watts 2004). My case study has shown that the main characteristic of Niger's new oil reality was oil talk. The oil talk emerged in a political arena that was already well-structured and in which the political players took up the topic of oil in speech acts of naming, blaming and claiming to question the legitimacy of their political opponents. Thus, instead of seeing oil as the root cause of political conflicts<sup>14</sup>, oil should be seen first of all as an *idiom* that frames pre-existing political conflicts in the language of oil (cf. Watts 2004, 75). In order to understand the politics of oil that were played in Niger around the oil refinery's inauguration in October 2011, it was necessary to situate the resource struggle in its particular sites to identify the positions, projects and practices of the political actors involved. By doing so, I was able to reveal the political players' scripts that shape the very articulation of oil talk, something I called *crude talking*.

However, I followed Barry's (2012; 2013b) notion of 'political situation' as an assemblage that extends the concept of the political arena in which strategic groups struggle for resources in order to incorporate material devices and technologies into the analysis of contested events. This aspect showed how the Nigerien oil talk is enacted through the actor-network of political players and media technologies. The analysis of the political actor/new media network revealed the 'how' of politics in Niger. The present case study showed that the socio-technical arrangements of newspaper, television, radio and mobile phone comprise different possibilities of access and agitation related to different levels of skill, knowledge, power positions, authority, anonymity and financial leverage. Therefore, political representation is nowadays heavily linked to access to new media. Nevertheless, political representation still continues to be an ideological tool that serves to legitimate political positions and thereby reinforces structures of inequality and subordination. Celebrating the democratizing force of new media and/or civil society therefore seems misleading.

14 I here only speak of political conflicts. In contrast to political conflicts that are always about access to power and resources, oil could indeed be the root cause for social or environmental conflicts through e.g. environmental pollution, expropriation etc. Nevertheless, as political ecology approaches have continuously argued, these conflicts are also not monocausal.



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