

Prayer, Piety, and Pleasure: Contested Models of Islamic Worship in Niger

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Since the early 1990s in Niger a state-controlled, ostensibly monolithic Islamic tradition has evolved into multiple modes of Muslim religiosity, some of which actively denounce the secularism of the state and the erosion of religious values. Thus the spread of Izala reformism contributed to the hardening of doctrinal differences and the sharpening of religious identities, sparking intense struggles over the correct practice of Islam. This does not mean that members of religious factions are necessarily united behind a common vision of Muslim society, nor can we say that lines between differing Muslim orientations are sharply drawn. Nevertheless, by democratizing access to religious knowledge and encouraging personal interpretation, Izala reforms forced Muslims of all persuasion to adopt a particular perspective and publicly articulate their personal convictions. In this context prayer has been the object of particularly virulent debate between rival Muslim factions. Because of how it sets the tempo of daily life in Nigerien communities, prayer is synonymous with Islam. Whether or not they perform the five daily prayers, Muslims are referred as "those who pray." In communal prayer, the faithful publicize their fellowship and unity. Distinctions or deviations in styles of worship which may prove acceptable in private inevitably become declarations of specific religious orientations. As visible expressions of religious membership, they also become part of struggles for the control of public space. In this essay I explore the contentious debates surrounding worship that took place in the provincial town of Dogondoutchi, and I highlight how liturgical issues, themselves an index of cleavages emerging within society, provided an effective means through which Muslims reinvented themselves as custodians of endangered Islamic values. Although "traditionalist" Muslims were compelled to articulate their interpretation of the Scriptures in the face of Izala criticisms, they continued to rely on the legitimizing weight of tradition and the value of commonsense to justify their ritual conduct.