

## THE VALUE OF RELIGIOUS SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE RE- PUBLIC OF NIGER AND NIGERIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

*NİJER CUMHURİYETİ VE NİJERYA'DA DİNİ SOSYAL SERMAYE-  
NİN DEĞERİ: SOSYOLOJİK VE TARİHSEL BİR PERSPEKTİF\**

Daud SALMAN\*\*

Elhadji Bachir Sani HAMET\*\*\*

**Abstract:** This article examines the value of religious social capital in both the Republic of Niger and Nigeria. More specifically, it analyses the role of Islam in social cohesion, peace, and politics. The emphasis in this context on religious associations and leaders as well as the various activities they conduct. Through qualitative analysis of historical records, the paper examines these activities and their impacts on social groups in both Niger and Nigeria, as well as the extension of social networks and interactions. This analysis also draws comparisons to other African contexts, to underscore the broader implications of religious social capital in advancing peace and development. The study demonstrates the interplay between Islamic practice and developmental outcomes, showcasing how Islam extends beyond religion to become an integral aspect of cultural identity in Niger and northern Nigeria. The findings suggest that Islam is a unifying force, deeply embedded in the societal fabric, and one of the rare values on which significant consensus exists among Nigeriens and Nigerians.

**Keywords:** Social Capital, Social Cohesion, Religious Associations, Islam, Republic of Niger, Nigeria

**Öz:** Bu çalışma hem Nijer Cumhuriyeti hem de Nijerya'da dini sosyal sermayenin değerini incelemektedir. Daha spesifik olarak, İslam'ın sosyal uyum, barış ve siyasetteki rolünü analiz etmektedir. Bu bağlamda, dini dernekler ve liderler ile onların yürüttüğü çeşitli faaliyetlere vurgu yapılmaktadır. Tarihi kayıtların nitel analizine dayanarak, bu makale bu faaliyetleri hem Nijer hem de Nijerya'daki sosyal gruplar üzerindeki etkilerini ve sosyal ağların ve etkileşimlerin genişlemesini incelemektedir. Çalışma ayrıca, diğer Afrika bağlamlarıyla karşılaştırmalar yaparak, dini sosyal sermayenin barış ve kalkınmayı ilerletmedeki daha geniş etkilerini vurgulamaktadır. Çalışma, İslami uygulamalar ile kalkınma sonuçları arasındaki etkileşimi ortaya koyarak, İslam'ın yalnızca bir din olmaktan öte, Nijer ve Kuzey Nijerya'da kültürel kimliğin ayrılmaz bir parçası haline geldiğini göstermektedir. Bulgular, İslam'ın toplumsal yapıya derinlemesine yerleşmiş birleştirici bir güç olduğunu ve Nijerliler ile Nijeryalılar arasında fikir birliği sağlanan nadir değerlerden biri olduğunu öne sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sosyal Sermaye, Sosyal Uyum, Dini Dernekler, İslam, Nijer Cumhuriyeti, Nijerya

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\*\* Daud Salman, Dr, University of Abuja, FCT Abuja Nigeria, e-mail: salman.daud@uniabuja.edu.ng, ORCID: 0000-0002-3371-4902

\*\*\* Elhadji Bachir Sani Hamet, Sakarya University, Institute of Social Science, Department of Sociology, Sakarya, Türkiye, esanihamet@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8504-113

## Introduction

The Republic of Niger is a West African country covering an area of 1,267,000 square kilometres. The country shares borders with Algeria and Libya to the north, Chad to the east, Nigeria and Benin to the south and Burkina Faso and Mali to the west. According to the latest general survey of the population and habitat in 2012, Niger's population is estimated at over 17 million. In 2023, it is estimated to be more than 27 million.<sup>1</sup> Niger's population is made up of nine main ethnic groups: the Hausa, Fulani, Zarma, Tuareg, Kanuri, Tubu, Arab and Gourmantché.

Islam, which was introduced to Niger very early on, now seems to be an important factor in national unity (Hassane et al., 2006). Niger's Muslims represent nearly 99% of the population and are spread throughout the country. In Niger, children (girls and boys) are admitted to Koranic schools at an early age (around 4 years old) to ensure their salvation and acquire normative social behaviour. Many children in public schools have attended or are still attending Qur'an schools. In general, Arabic literacy is not the primary goal of parents; Koranic education is the parents' second duty to their child after the ceremony of the name (Hassane et al., 2006).

Britain established the entity known as Nigeria through the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914 (Alkali et al, 2014). Prior to the arrival of colonial powers, the Nigerian people existed as different, independent, and separate entities. The northern region of the country is predominantly Muslim. Islam was introduced to northern Nigeria through the Kanem Borno Empire, with the activities of Arab merchants playing a significant role in its spread in Borno. Other parts of northern Nigeria, such as Hausa Land, also encountered Islam through trade (Alkali et al, 2014).

With an estimated population of over 228 million in 2024, Nigeria is characterized by momentous pluralism, boasting over 350 ethnic groups each with unique native practices and customs. Beyond ethnic diversity, religion holds considerable importance for most Nigerians, further complicating societal dynamics. According to a recent survey led by John Campbell, a former US Ambassador to Nigeria, 92% of Nigerian Muslims and 87% of Nigerian Christians prioritize religion over ethnicity or nationality (Kareem & Yekini 2019).

Due to the inherent religious and cultural connections between northern Nigeria and Republic of Niger, this study seeks to explore the multifaceted value of religious social capital in both nations. Employing historical methodology, the study uses qualitative analysis of historical records, sociological data, and case studies to examine the role of Islam as a unifying force that promotes social cohesion and fosters developmental outcomes. The methodology focuses on analyzing the contributions of religious leaders and associations, their activities, and their impacts on extending social

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1 <https://countrymeters.info/fr/Niger>

networks, influencing political landscapes, and resolving conflicts in both nations.

### **The Concept of Social Capital**

The concept of social capital was first used by the American author Lyda Judsen Hanifan during his work on family associations in a rural school. For the first time, Hanifan gave this concept non-economic explanations (Şan & Şimşek 2011). In fact, although frequently used by sociologists and political scientists, the cultural variable is largely absent from economists' analyses of development (Dargent, 2002). According to these thinkers, there is no connection between development and a country's cultural values. This point of view is in line with the prospect of global cultural homogenisation and the dominance of the rationality paradigm in economic science. But Max Weber's works on *the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* illustrate the thesis that links development and cultural value (Dargent 2002). As a result, Weber became one of the first authors to establish a correlation between economic development and cultural values. Indeed, it is in the same context that Şan & Şimşek (2011) point out that Weber's *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* prepares the way for the social capital approach by establishing a relationship between cultural values and economic development.

However, other pioneers of social capital theory include Alexis de Tocqueville (*Democracy in America*), Emile Durkheim (*Social Division of Labour*), Ferdinand Tönnies (*Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*) and Karl Marx (*Historical Materialism and Class Consciousness*) (Şan and Şimşek,). There is a second category of authors who have updated and developed this concept. These include Pierre Bourdieu (*Distinction*), James Coleman (*Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital*), Robert Putnam (*Making Democracy Work and Bowling Alone*) and finally Fukuyama in his book (*Trust: creating Social Virtues and Prosperity*) (Şan ve Şimşek 2011).

Meanwhile, the end of the Second World War coincided with the production of a series of theories. One of the most important of these was the theory of modernisation. The main goal of this theory was to eradicate the inequalities that existed amongst the world's population. According to this theory, the only path to development was to follow the Western model. Thus, it is in this context that the concept of social capital as a development model has reappeared (Şan, 2006).

For a long time, limited to narrow sectors, this concept is now used by several disciplines. In this context, Ali Aydemir (2011) notes that "social capital, which used to emphasise the importance of the family in ensuring success at school, has become a key descriptive concept for almost all problems in the social sphere". According to him, social capital in general terms emphasises the quantity and quality of our social relations. Woolcock (2003 cited by Ali Aydemir, 2011) defines social capital as follows: " what matters is not what you know but who you know ". Field (2004) for his part, sums up social capital in these terms: "relationships matter. By making

connections with one another, and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things that they either could not achieve by themselves or could only achieve with great difficulty. In general, then, it follows that the more people you know, and the more you share a common outlook with them, the richer you are in social capital”.

Furthermore, social capital can be categorized into three main categories: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital involves strong, close-knit relationships within homogeneous groups, fostering in-group trust and mutual support but sometimes reinforcing exclusivity (Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, bridging social capital denotes the connections across diverse groups, in an attempt to uphold inclusion, tolerance, and broader societal cohesion (Putnam, 2000). Also, linking social capital relates to vertical relationships between individuals or communities and institutions, facilitating access to resources and opportunities, especially for minority and marginalized populations (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). These categories highlight the many-sided ways social capital contributes to societal development and stability.

In sociology, social capital generally expresses the fact that the spending of time, effort, money and other goods on social activities is not simply final consumption or a particular form of leisure but is also an investment that contributes to production and can be a source of profit (in money or other forms). Social capital can be either an “individual resource” in the Burt sense, or a “collective resource” in James Coleman’s and Pierre Bourdieu’s view (Godechot & Mariot, 2004). It is also important to differentiate between social capital and human capital. According to (Roland, 1995), social capital is a capacity developed between actors, while human capital is a capacity that is specific to individuals.

In short, Bourdieu distinguishes three types of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. However, Bourdieu sees social capital as a great opportunity for the elite. He “really thought that social capital was an asset of the privileged and a means of maintaining their superiority (Field, 2004). For his part, Putnam sees social networks and trust as the source of social capital, while Fukuyama attaches greater importance to the notion of trust (Aydemir, 2011).

## **Islam, Peace and Development in Niger Republic**

### **The Spread of Islam in Niger**

The spread of Islam into West Africa is a long-term process. First of all, there were traders and caravanners in western Sudan from the 8th Century and in central Sudan. Then there were the commercial and literary exchanges and the pilgrimage to Mecca, which led Africa to open up to the Arab-Muslim world (Gomez-Perez,

2005). According to authors such as Maikoréma (1998 cited by Hassane et al, 2006), in Niger, Islam had been introduced by the Egyptian Busr Ben Abi Artah between 666 and 667 CE, before it had even reached Morocco. This religion is practiced by almost the whole population of Niger (99%). Therefore, despite its cultural and linguistic diversity, the people of Niger have historically lived in peace and social harmony. Islam served as a cement uniting the social and linguistic groups, which were particularly different as the interests of herders and farmers generally diverged (Hassane et al., 2006).

The colonial domination of Africa in the 19th century faced several forms of resistance. In this context, the Niger population also put-up resistance to the French colonisers through traditional and religious authorities. At that time, Islam was already a well-established value among the Niger population, and in some cases across Africa. As a result, it played a crucial galvanising and catalysing role in the fight against so-called “white miscreants”. In fact, Islam enabled the Niger people to unite as one, putting aside their disagreement and fighting for their freedom. This led to jihads purifying the morals of the people against the native princes and converting the pagans. These jihads were conducted by religious leaders such as Ousman Dan Fodio (“emergence of the Muslim Empire of Sokoto” in 1804) and Al Hadj Tall (“birth of a Toucouleur Empire between Senegal and Niger” around 1860). Later, other jihads were waged more against European colonisation (the Samori jihad between Mali, Guinea and Ivory Coast from 1861 to 1898) (Gomez-Perez 2005, 129). The French colonisers realised the strength, relevance and value of this religious capital, and from the moment of their arrival did everything in their power to break the link between the Niger people and Islam. This consisted, in particular, in ending the education system based on Islamic traditions that existed at the time. Indeed, (Moumouni, 1964) and (Ki-Zerbo et al., 1997), as well as many other authors, have shown that before the arrival of the colonisers, there was an education system based on African realities and local cultures. With the arrival of the colonial powers, this system was suddenly interrupted.

### **Islamic Associations in Niger**

Islam in Niger Republic is dominated by the *Malikite* brotherhood, divided into the *Tidjaniyya*, *Qadriyya* and Salafi sects. Until 1990, there was only one Islamic association in Niger. Since the advent of democracy in 1991, political life and several other sectors of the country have been liberalised. This democratisation has enabled religious, labour and political associations to proliferate (Hassane et al., 2006). Nowadays, there are around a hundred religious associations in Niger, each with thousands of members. The main activities of these associations are preaching, educating the population, managing and preventing conflicts of all kinds and development activities.

## Preaches and Education

Religious associations fulfil important functions in the socio-economic and political life of the country. The most common activities of these associations in Niger are preaching (Hassane et al., 2006). The preaches cover all aspects of life in the country and attract a fairly wide and varied audience. There are daily preaches in the public and private media or in open areas. It is also important at this point to note other important tools for conveying and propagating preaches not only in urban areas but also in rural areas. These are the preaching CDs and DVDs that are actively contributing to the re-Islamisation of the people of Niger (Sounaye, 2011). Other preaching, however, is done periodically. This is the case of the preaching commonly called *waazin kasa*<sup>2</sup> in the local language, which according to (Hassane et al., 2006) is the most recent and most important form, attracting millions of adepts. They constitute a place or area par excellence for bringing people of all ages together. These types of preaching undoubtedly strengthen unity between people, the spirit of solidarity, mutual aid and brotherhood between citizens. In short, they strengthen their social networks. They also provide a forum for the exchange of information and knowledge between religious and political leaders and the general public. These preaches can contribute not only to education and social peace, but also to social cohesion. Indeed, the issues discussed at these meetings are wide-ranging and varied, affecting all public and private sectors in the country and beyond the African continent.

Another significant activity carried out by Islamic associations in Niger is the creation and management of Koranic schools. These schools existed in Niger before the colonial period. More than preaching, the Koranic school occupies an important place in the lives of the people of Niger. This school completes their education and socialisation and is anchored in the population's customs and traditions. In fact, Nigeriens of all ages attend Koranic schools, most of them as children, others as adults or as older. Most Koranic schools have associations that organise themselves and help their brothers, whether it's with work in the fields, building their houses or any other social activity. This reinforces the feeling of mutual aid, solidarity and affiliation to the same community. Hence, the third area of intervention for religious associations, after preaching and education, is social assistance. This social assistance is provided by the majority of associations and consists of helping people in need in the areas of health (distribution of medicines), education (scholarships) and food (distribution of food) (Hassane et al., 2006).

Associations, as we have seen, undertake a wide range of activities. Furthermore, most of these associations include non-governmental organisations. These organisations support the government in various sectors such as education, health, water, the environment, etc. Even if these activities are not sufficiently visible, they contribute in some way to the country's economic development. For example, religious leaders raise public awareness of certain health issues. The charisma of these leaders and

their knowledge of the social and cultural realities of the country ensure that they are listened to and respected by the population as a whole. As a result, they facilitate the government's implementation of certain development policies. It is in recognition of their importance that, from independence to the present day, successive governments have sought to involve leaders in peacebuilding. One of their most important functions is the prevention and management of interpersonal and inter-community conflicts.

Although this is an area that falls within the remit of the administrative authorities, the influence of the associations, their knowledge of Islamic law and customary values, combined with the weight of Islam in Niger society, means that these organisations are increasingly involved in conflict management and prevention. The judicial system generally refers cases of dispute or conflict to Islamic associations in order to deal with them (Hassane et al., 2006).

The religious authority is perhaps the only legitimate authority that almost all Nigeriens respect and trust. Most people trust this religious authority more than the government. It is an authority on which there is a certain consensus among Nigeriens, despite a few minor divergences linked to sectarian affiliations. This spirit of consensus is proof of a well-constructed and durable social capital. It is also an important factor in the vitality and continuity of social relations. As (Dekker, 2001 cited by Şan 2008, 75) points out, if social capital has reached a high level in a society, it is understood that society has a structure that has achieved a basis of peace and consensus. This situation naturally creates direct results for the development of that society.

Frequently in Niger, trade unions, workers' organisations, students' organisations, human rights organisations and civil society organisations seek mediation from religious leaders in cases of conflict with the government. However, recently, the willingness of some religious leaders to succumb to the siren calls of politics is having a negative impact on the image of all religious leaders. Their credibility with the people is being seriously harmed.

As we have seen, Islam plays an important role in the education and socialisation of Niger's population. This process generally takes the form of preaching and Koranic schools. In addition to this, Islam also serves as a means of social control for citizens, moralising them so that they do not commit acts that are contrary to social norms. From this point of view, social capital appears to be a solution to the many anomalies from which societies suffer. As (Altun & Hira 2011) emphasise, the concept of social capital has recently been seen as a proposition in dealing with many issues. It continues to exist as an alternative power in many sectors, including the economics, health, education, and security.

### **Overview of Religious Diversity in Nigeria**

Nigeria is keenly recognized in the global religious community and can be characterized as "incurably religious", evident from its outward expressions of religiosity (Ogbogo

2016, 170). Religion serves as the ideological foundation for the behaviour of many individuals in Nigerian society (Ogbogo 2016, 170). The populace professes religious beliefs, and even the Constitution reflects this by starting with “UNDER GOD,” although the nation hasn’t officially adopted a state religion (Pate, 2014).

Additionally, it’s difficult to find many countries with as much religious diversity and polarization as Nigeria (Dowd, 2016). According to Statista’s 2018 estimates, Islam is the predominant religion in Nigeria, with over half of the population (53.5%) identified as Muslim. Christian denominations comprise approximately 45% and traditional religions make up 0.6%. (Sasu, 2023). However, data regarding the comparative percentage of those identifying as Muslim or Christian in Nigeria are highly contentious. Adogame (2010), illustrates the impact of ethno-religious factors on the reliability of census data in Nigeria in the following manner:

*In the past, the politicisation of the census on religious and ethnic grounds resulted in unreliable religio-ethnic demographic data in Nigeria, as population statistics were (and still are) often manipulated for political, economic, and religious ends, not least because such figures constitute one basis for the sharing of national revenue and other resources. That partly explains why religious indices were excluded from the recent national census (2010, 479).*

As such, it is established that Christians, generally found in the South, and Muslims, predominantly in the North, constitute the two largest blocks of religious identities in Nigeria. Extensive scholarly literature explores and seeks to explain the rise of affiliation with these two religions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often at the expense of identification with indigenous religious practices (McKinnon, 2021). However, Christianity and Islam, that evidently represent the foremost religious traditions in Nigeria are both influenced by indigenous religious traditions (Adogame, 2010).

In academic circles, indigenous religious forms are often classified by the corresponding linguistic or cultural groups they belong to, such as the Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Kalabari, Hausa, and Tiv religions. This classification recognises the multiplicity within these religions, as beliefs and rituals may vary among different ethnic groups. Indigenous religions are typically localized, with some beliefs being more widespread while others differ from one ethnic group to another. This classification highlights the shared, similar, and related aspects of these belief systems, often influenced by specific ethnic, social, and environmental factors unique to each locality. Indigenous religions are not ascribed to specific historical origins but are believed to be transmitted across generations (Adogame, 2010).

The influence of indigenous religious beliefs remains deeply ingrained in the perspectives and values of many Nigerians, regardless of their adherence to new religious affiliations. This enduring relevance is evident in the widespread belief in supernatural forces, the significance attributed to ancestors, and the increasing



popularity of various deities such as Ogun, Osun, Emenala, and Olokun. Traditional practices like the Igue Festival in Benin City and the presence of secret societies like the Ogboni Society in Western Nigeria, as well as cultural events like masquerades such as Egungun and Eyo among the Yoruba, serve as examples of how indigenous religions continue to thrive in Nigerian society. Additionally, divination, healing, and oracle systems like Arockukwu among the Igbo and Ifa among the Yoruba, along with widespread beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery, underscore the resilience of indigenous religious traditions amidst the complexities of a diverse and rapidly evolving society (Adogame, 2010).

Conversely, the arrival of Roman Catholic missionaries to the coastal areas of the Niger-Delta region in southern Nigeria signified the inception of Christianity in the 15th century. During this period, a few church buildings were raised, and a reasonable number of converts were recorded. Christianity began to have a significant presence in selected areas; however, its effective evangelization was most manifest with the homecoming of freed slaves from Sierra Leone and Brazil in 1842. During this period, missionaries were dispatched to evangelize the western part of the country via Badagry and Abeokuta, as well as the southern region through Calabar. These missionaries included the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Wesley Methodist Missionary Society, and the Roman Catholic mission (Dele, 2022).

Although Roman Catholic and Anglican churches are the largest Christian denominations, the majority of Christians belong to various other churches and sects (Dowd, 2016). Protestantism and local syncretic Christianity are evident in Yoruba areas, while Catholicism dominated the Igbo and closely related areas. Both Protestantism and Catholicism dominated in the Ibibio, Annang, and the Efik kiosa lands (Oritsemuwa et al., 2014). The Christ Apostolic Church (the pioneering “Aladura” Movement in Nigeria) and the “Aladura” Church, an indigenous Christian sect with strong roots in the Yoruba regions, have experienced growth, along with evangelical churches in general, expanding into adjacent and southern areas of the middle belt (Oritsemuwa et al., 2014).

### **Dynamics among Islamic Sects in Nigeria**

The coexistence of multiple religions in Nigeria stresses regional and ethnic distinctions, with Islam preponderating in the north and holding noteworthy numbers in the southwestern, Yoruba part of the country. Islam holds a crucial position in West Africa, and Nigeria stands as one of the largest Muslim-populated nations in the region (Jones, 2005). Its introduction to northern Nigeria dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It made its way into the Kanem-Bornu Empire during this period, gaining momentum when the state had its first Muslim ruler, Hummay, in Kanem (Sodiq, 1992). And by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Islam had firmly established its presence in major capitals, extending into rural areas and toward the central plateaus. Shehu Usman dan Fodio instituted an Islamic-based government in northern Nigeria prior to the era of colonialism.

Additionally, Islam reached the southwestern Yoruba-speaking regions during the reign of Mansa Musa in the Mali Empire. The Yoruba colloquially referred to Islam as “Esin-Mali” or sometimes “Esin-Mole,” signifying a religion originating from Mali (Oritsemuwa, Ottuh, and Aitufe, 2014).

By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence had garnered massive support across all strata of Hausa society (Adogame, 2010). The diversity and complexity of Islamic movements in Nigeria is partly exemplified by the Sufi orders or brotherhoods. Two major movements involved in the Islamisation process in Nigeria were the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya. The former is much older and has spread widely in northern Nigeria since the nineteenth century. The Qadiriyya emphasises intellectual pursuits more than the Tijaniyya (which was introduced in the same century). Both brotherhoods have witnessed tension and rivalry for several decades of their existence (Adogame, 2010).

Other Islamic organisations oppose these Sufi brotherhoods owing to the doctrinal differences (Adogame, 2010). Over time, intra-Islamic tensions have arisen from this opposition, pitting the anti-innovation reformists against the two main Sufi brotherhoods, namely, the *Qadiriyya* and the *Tijaniyya*, as well the religious establishment in northern Nigeria. These reformists aim to sanitise and refine Islam from what they perceive as errors and innovations concomitant with Sufism. Additionally, they advocate for a more prominent role for Islam in Nigerian politics, advocating for Sharia law to be the governing law and for the integration of religious and state authority. One such anti-innovation reform movement is the Jama’at Izalat al-Bida wa Iqamat al-Sunnah (Society for the Eradication of Evil Innovations and the Reestablishment of the Sunnah), better known as *Izala* (Paden, 2008).

The *Izala* movement has contributed to the resurgence of religious consciousness among Muslims in the northern region, accusing Nigeria’s Muslim elites, including the emirs of northern Nigeria, of aligning with secularists and Christians. (Paden 2012, 79). The movement further accused the Islamic religious establishment of neglecting to advocate for the integration of religious and state authority, a principle they believe is inherent in Islam. However, over time, the *Izala* has fragmented into multiple factions, losing its cohesion as a unified revival movement. (Dowd 2016, 6).

Nevertheless, the emergence of anti-innovation reform movements, coupled with prevalent trust deficit in the secular state’s ability to address corruption and maintain law and order, prompted northern politicians to codify the Shariah in the constitutions of their respective states. The push to constitutionally codify the Shariah gained traction in 1999, when Zamfara State led the way as the first to officially adopt the Shariah law. By the year 2003, the Shariah law had been constitutionally recognized in the twelve northern states of Nigeria. Although Shariah law applies exclusively to Muslims, many Christians in these twelve states claim that they have been relegated to second-class citizens within their own country, as the privileged status afforded to

Shariah law suggests that Islam is the state's established religion (Dowd 2016, 6).

On the other hand, both Qadiriyya and Tijjaniyya Sufi Brotherhoods have played an important role in disseminating Islam in the northern part of Nigeria and providing guidance to the Ummah of all generations. The ulama of the Sufi movement were responsible for the early establishment of Islamic teaching, education and preaching in Northern Nigeria, several generations before the arrival of colonial masters. The degree of underdevelopment during that period was so profound that anyone undertaking to advance the cause of Islam had to make significant sacrifices, whether in acquiring knowledge or in disseminating it. This is precisely what they faced and ultimately overcame. They departed from their homes and journeyed long distances on foot, or at best, on donkeys, to remote areas far from their villages and towns, sacrificing the comforts and luxuries of their immediate families and communities. They were pioneers and founding figures in establishing the renowned "*Tsangaya*" Islamic educational system, now commonly known as the "*Almajiri* system." While the *Almajiri* system faces numerous challenges and is often misunderstood and misrepresented, its discussion lies beyond the scope of this work. However, it is evident that there is a pressing need for its reform to address the current challenges it faces. (Yakasai & Abubakar, 2020).

The mission of translating Islamic scripts from full Arabic text to the various native languages facilitated the teaching and comprehension of the Islamic religion among several communities in northern Nigeria. Additionally, the conversion of the Arabic alphabets and vowels into "Ajami" enhanced the individuals' understanding of the Islamic concepts and simultaneously empowered them by liberating them from the darkness of illiteracy. With members of the Ummah now able to read and write in "Ajami", this contribution by the Tariqah Ulama elevated the educational standards of individual Muslims and the Islamic society as a whole, even preceding the introduction of Western education by the British (Ansari, 2018).

### **Islamic leaders and their influence on politics and society**

The historical presence of Islam in Nigeria has had a deep impact on the nation's political development. This influence is demonstrated by the creation of Islamic states like Kanem-Bornu and the Sokoto Caliphate in the 16th and 19th centuries respectively. Also due to the fact that Islam represents a comprehensive lifestyle for Muslims, it has consistently intertwined with politics in Nigeria, particularly in the Muslim-dominated north. Even during colonization the British administration acknowledged this connection in their interactions with Islamic communities in the north and utilized it to validate their colonial governance in the area (Dele, 2022).

Islamic leaders have consistently been at the vanguard of shaping public perception regarding any existing political developments, particularly in northern Nigeria. For instance, when the British occupation of the Sokoto caliphate commenced with the

seizure of Bida in 1897 and culminated in the occupation of Sokoto by 1902- by 1903, all emirates had been subdued, although pockets of resistance persisted- the leadership of the caliphate confronted with the dilemma of how to address this new unprecedented circumstance, whether through resistance, collaboration, or emigration. Meanwhile, the British grappled with the challenge of governing an Islamic society based on secular and non-Islamic principles. Regarding the debate on collaboration or emigration, the Gwandu jurist Ahmad Ibn Sa'id drew parallels between the situation in Sokoto and historical invasions such as the Qaramanthian invasion of Mecca in 930 CE and the Mongolian invasion of Baghdad in 1258 CE. He concluded that an interim compromise with the colonial state was feasible as long as it didn't openly impede the practice of the faith. Ibn Sa'id argued that collaboration with the British didn't entail disbelief "as long as the resident himself doesn't renounce the faith. Voluntary collaboration would be disobedience, but under coercion, it would be permissible." (Montclos, 2014).

As such, Islamic leaders assumed prominent roles in political landscape during the colonial period. Confronted with threats to their religious and cultural practices, many Nigerian Muslims sought guidance and support from Islamic leaders. Identifying the necessity to safeguard their communities against the cultural and religious shifts enforced by colonial authorities, some Islamic leaders embarked on political activism. Leveraging their religious authority, they frequently mobilized communities and campaigned for political transformation (Edmund, 2023,).

The influence of Islamic leaders in politics became even more pronounced after the independence. Although there was never a distinct Islamic political party as it was known in many Muslim countries like Sudan, Tunis, Egypt etc. In Nigeria, the sole exception to this was likely the United Muslim Party based in Lagos from 1953 to 1966. This highly localized organization lacked a nationwide following and focused solely on safeguarding the interests of an urban minority faction (Montclos, 2014). However, the two main political parties in Northern Nigeria at independence were obviously connected with religious movements. For instance, the conservative NPC (Northern People's Congress) was clearly linked with the Qadiriyya suffi order and the aristocracy (Sarakuna in Hausa language) of the Sokoto Caliphate. In the way, the progressive NEPU (Northern Elements Progressive Union) was linked with the Tijaniyya brotherhood and the commoners/masses (talakawa in Hausa) of Kano. Though, their tenure was short-lived. While NEPU continued to operate as an opposition party, the leaders of the NPC were assassinated in the first coup of 1966, leading to the dissolution of both parties under the subsequent military regimes (Montclos, 2014).

The dynamics during the Second Republic (1979-1983) were more complicated. While NEPU underwent a revival under the aegis of the PRP (People's Redemption Party), which maintained ties with the Tijaniyya, the ruling NPN (National Party of

Nigeria) lacked a clear allegiance. NPN garnered support from the aristocracy of Sokoto and the spiritual leader of Izala, Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, who had a close relationship with President Shehu Shagari (Montclos, 2014).

During their formative phase before legal registration and the transition to civilian rule in 1979, the Izala were on the verge of establishing a political platform. Hence, they adopted various names, referring to themselves either as an association (Kungiyar) or a Congress (Jamiyyar), such as the “Party for the Propagation of Islam” (Jamiyyar Ada Addinin Musulunci) in Kaduna. However, ultimately, the Izala did not evolve into a political entity to compete in elections (Montclos, 2014).

In various instances, the viewpoints of Islamic leaders have wielded significant influence over election outcomes in Nigeria. Just as President Sheu Shagari was supported by Sheikh Abubakar Gumi in 1979 election, the director of MURIC (the Muslim Rights Concern), Professor Ishaq Akintola, publicly articulated his endorsement of Bola Tinubu, of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and a Yoruba Muslim, as the most suitable candidate in 2023 general election (Oluwatoye, 2024).

The impact of Islamic leaders in ensuring peace and stability by shaping political outcomes outspreads beyond Nigeria’s borders. In 2023, amid intense deliberations on how to address the political crisis sparked by a coup d’Etat in Niger Republic, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) expressed its opposition to resorting to sanctions and military intervention in the country. Some prominent Islamic scholars, led by Sheikh Bala Lau, the national leader of the Jama’atul Izalatil Bid’ah wa Iqamatis Sunnah, (Izala) sought permission from President Bola Tinubu to mediate the crisis. These clerics advised against employing force in Niger. President Tinubu pledged that if the clerics could engage with the coup leaders in Niger and encourage them to be open to concessions, then ECOWAS, under his chairmanship, would also be prepared to act accordingly. Following a series of mediation efforts by Nigerian Islamic leaders, ECOWAS’s decision was ultimately influenced (Okafor, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to examine the relationship between social capital, peace and development. The article has identified and examined a variety of issues. First of all, the article discusses the concept of social capital. It should be noted that this concept was first used in 1916 by the American author Lyda Judsen Hanifan in his work entitled “*The Rural School Community Center*”. It was subsequently developed and reviewed by significant authors such as Bourdieu, Putnam, Coleman and Fukuyama. The second part of the article is about the value of religious capital in Niger and Nigeria and its role in social stability and development. For this purpose, religious associations were used to explore the role played by Islam in the countries. As almost the entire population of Niger is Muslim, this religion is present in all areas of life in

the country. Although it is officially a secular state, Niger has a close connection with Islam. Nigeria on the other hand, with presence of significant numbers of adherents to other religions, the role of Islamic clerics in shaping politics, peace and harmony of the country cannot be overemphasised. Similar to Niger, in Nigeria the separation of state and religion is purely theoretical.

Although, majority of Niger's population adheres to Islam and shares cultural and religious connections with Nigerian Muslims, especially those in Northern Nigeria, in Niger the level of tolerance between people is also considerable. Apart from a few minor political problems, the majority of the Muslim population generally lives in perfect harmony with the Christian minority. Whereas in Nigeria, a clear division exists along religious lines, with the Muslim-majority north and Christian-majority south, this division consistently fosters tension during electoral periods in the country.

Despite the secular status of both nations, governments have constantly sought the participation of religious leaders in public affairs due to the social legitimacy, acceptance and respect they command. Hence, it is evident from this observation that the influence of religious social capital is prominent in both countries. However, it is noteworthy that Nigeria particularly requires a reaffirmation of the spirit of tolerance among diverse religious faithful. Whereas in Niger, the spirit of tolerance and the joking affinity between Niger's ethnic groups, constitute an important basis for social cohesion and national unity. This represents a wealth of social capital that deserves to be revitalised and protected.

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