



SURVIVING WITH DIGNITY

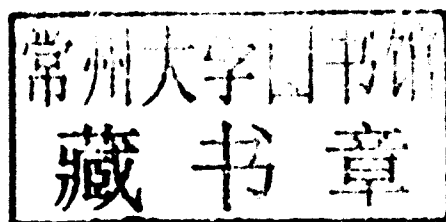
HAUSA COMMUNITIES OF NIAMEY, NIGER

SCOTT M. YOUNGSTEDT

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Scott M. Youngstedt



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Introduction: Making Sense of the World

*Rashin sani ya hi dare duhu:
Ignorance is darker than the night*

Journeys through Time and Space

The Rimbo bus station of Niamey at 5:00 a.m. on a cool day in January 2010 was an utterly chaotic scene. Five hundred people with luggage crowded around ten busses, jostling to get to the front of the lines. Rimbo personnel changed the destination placards (Agadez, Zinder, Lomé, Dakar, Ouagadougou) on several busses over the next few minutes, while other busses with their engines running remained unlabeled. Over the hum of multiple engines and the din of the crowd, we struggled to hear our names on the list being read by an attendant sitting on a bus. Hassane was hosting my wife Sara Beth Keough, a cultural geographer, and me on a visit to Kuka, his home village. We managed to secure the last three open seats, and while they were not nearly as large and comfortable as those on the first private busses that began operating in Niger about a decade ago, I recognized the luxury of bus travel. Our trip involved a four-hour bus ride along Niger's national highway 275 kilometers eastward to the town of Dogondoutchi. From there we completed our journey 25 kilometers northward by bush taxi on a deeply rutted, rocky, dirt road.

I had met Hassane purely by chance on a hot afternoon in 1991 while on a 10-kilometer walk through several neighborhoods of Niamey trying to re-orient myself and assess what had changed in the three years since I had last visited Niger's capital in 1988. I was parched and had just begun to search for something to drink when a roadside vendor with a small thatched hangar for shade and a refrigerator greeted me with a smile and a friendly, "*Bonjour.*" I responded, "*Bonjour,*" before

surprising him with a Hausa greeting, “*Ina wuni?*” (“How have you passed the day?”). We then exchanged a typical series of Hausa greetings asking about each other’s work, families, and fatigue. I introduced myself as “Chaibou”—a Muslim Hausa name ceremoniously given to me in 1988—and he introduced himself as “Hassane.” He offered me a soft-backed chair and a Coke, while he and several other men sat beside me on hard wooden benches. After allowing me a few moments to quench my thirst, Hassane observed, “I have never met a white man who speaks Hausa,” and asked, “Where did you learn to speak Hausa and where are you from?” I explained that I first learned Hausa as a university student in the U.S., my home, but that I really learned to speak Hausa during several months of travel and residency across Southern Niger and Northern Nigeria in 1988 and 1989. “*Ikön Allah*” (“By the power of God”), exclaimed Hassane.

I returned to visit Hassane the following day and I have enjoyed a special bond with him ever since. I quickly learned that Hassane was widely respected as a friendly, generous, pious, knowledgeable, engaging conversationalist—an all-around *mutumin kirki* (“good man”). He had built an enormous social network, and was regarded as a focal point in the Kuka migrant community in Niamey. He introduced me to dozens of relatives and friends over the years, many of who became critically important participants in my research. In addition to spending hundred of hours in Hassane’s *hira* (“informal street corner conversation”) group, we have shared visits to football and wrestling matches, horse races, Islamic sermons, and funerals. For many years, Hassane extended an open invitation to me to accompany him on a visit to his hometown. I had long been intrigued by this opportunity, given my research focus on Hausa migration and diaspora, other remarkably revealing trips with men that I had met in Niamey to their home villages, and our long-term relationship that blossomed as a deep friendship despite our vastly different life experiences. However, we had never been able to coordinate a visit to Kuka until January 2010, and hence I was very excited to finally have this opportunity.

The bus trip to Dogondoutchi reminded me of the importance of sharing and Islam in Nigerien society. As soon as we sat down, a woman

struggling with a large duffel bag plopped her baby on Hassane's lap, apparently recognizing the kindness in his friendly smile and demeanor. Hassane gently held the baby for most of the trip. Early into the journey the bus pulled into a station for the morning Muslim prayer. Virtually all passengers grabbed plastic teakettles filled with water provided by Rimbo, performed their ablutions, prayed, and re-entered the bus. I have long been struck by the powerful ways that Islam unites Nigeriens. Hassane recently joined the *'yan Izala*, a strict, reformist Islamist sect whose adherents usually pray together in their own congregations. On this occasion, Hassane simply joined the crowd—undoubtedly consisting of people of various sects—at the makeshift, open-air, mosque at the back of the bus station.

Upon reaching Dogondoutchi, Hassane went to negotiate a ride to Kuka on a bush taxi. He had cell-phoned family and friends before our departure to inform them of our visit, and hence a group of people were waiting to welcome us when the bush taxi arrived in Kuka. Aliou, Moctar, and other men who I had come to know well in Niamey, but had not seen in a decade, were among them. Given that it was nearly three months into the dry season, the village was largely vacant of working-aged men. Only young children, some women, and older residents remained—with a few exceptions. Those able to work had left the village for Niamey and other West and North African cities until the rains returned. Twenty curious, smiling, and giggling children immediately surrounded us. Baso, Hassane's mother and our host, explained that she had heard stories over many years about the American professor that her son had befriended. She thanked God for our visit, and invited us to stay as long as we liked, presenting us with a large bowl of sizzling hot k'osai ("fried bean cakes")—my favorite Hausa snack—and a calabash of cool water.

The Nigerien hospitality that I have always found so humbling was certainly evident in Hassane's village. Salisou, who Hassane had introduced me to Niamey in 1991, greeted me as an old friend, despite the three years that had passed since our last meeting. Hassane and Salisou explained that we would have more privacy if we stayed in the compound Salisou shares with Hampsou, one of his two wives, than in Hassane's family's home, and that both Baso and Hampsou would cook

for us. Salisou's bull, guinea fowl, donkeys, and chickens—an entourage that we dubbed, "the animal chorus"—welcomed us as we entered his compound. We greeted Hampsou, their children, and neighbors, and settled into the home that Ibrahim and Hampsou graciously vacated for the duration of our stay. As Hassane called his father in Niamey to let him know that we had arrived safely, I pondered the technological leap forward represented by cell phones in this village of one to two thousand people (depending on the seasons) that had only three electrified homes, a few generators, no running water, and no biomedical health clinic.

Our three days were packed with activities. We greeted dozens of relatives, friends, and neighbors of our hosts, including the *mai gari* ("village headman"); climbed the 500-meter high rock mesa that towers over the village; took long walks in the surrounding countryside to visit farms and granaries, nomadic Fulani camps, neighboring villages, and a lake; ate sumptuous meals; and enjoyed long conversations with our hosts, especially over strong cups of tea late into the night.

As is almost always the case among Hausa, my conversations with Kuka friends and residents were free flowing. In these *hira* groups, we reminisced about our time together in Niamey, mostly laughing at humorous events that we jointly experienced, but also remembering the lean times that the men had endured. We discussed each other's families, and I asked for updates about several Kuka men that I had met in Niamey but had not seen for years. I learned that some had settled in Nigeria, Benin, and Ghana, some had died, and that the whereabouts of others was unknown. After catching up, we covered a wide range of topics, including politics, career trajectories, rural–urban connections, and the relative merits of village and city life.

The men introduced politics to the conversation by informing me that they are ecstatically happy that Barack Obama was elected President of the U.S., and expressed their hope that he would do good things for Africa. I told them that I shared their feelings about Obama, but that I was also curious to hear their take on the political situation in Niger. As we spoke, President Mamadou Tandja was just ten days into his illegal third term in office, after dismantling the Supreme Court and National Assembly and holding bogus elections the previous year. The

men agreed that Tandja had done a fair job as President, but that it was time for him to step down. They explained that they had no control over what would happen next and so therefore they would not worry about it. However, they also expressed hope that conflict would be avoided. Hassane explained that, "After all, peace is the most important value in Islam," to which his friends added, "*Amin.*"

The men compared their life histories. All were approaching 50 years of age and had spent most of the last 30 years in Niamey and in various West African countries. All had carefully maintained ties to Kuka, particularly by regularly sending money to their parents even during times when they could barely make ends meet. Hassane migrated seasonally between Kuka and Niamey for a few years as a teen and into his early twenties. Over the next 20 years he rarely visited home, but kept in touch. During the last three rainy seasons, however, he began traveling home for weeks at a time to help out during key phases of planting and harvesting. Salisou and Aliou have followed similar paths, though they are more actively preparing to retire in Kuka than Hassane is. Salisou came home for the duration of the past few rainy seasons to resume farm work, and is spending more time in Kuka in dry seasons, as he was when we visited him, repairing mud brick homes that were damaged in previous rainy seasons. Aliou stopped coming to Niamey five years ago, and opened a modest dry goods shop in Kuka.

Hassane has typically been more committed to the city than the others, despite declining opportunities in Niamey. Until a decade ago, he operated a modestly successful dry goods and cold soda trading business seven days a week. Today, aside from occasional odd jobs, he works only one night per week selling milk and honey and other refreshments to crowds of 500 people attending public *'yan Izala* Islamist sermons in his neighborhood. Nevertheless, Hassane had built his reputation in Niamey and considered himself an urbanite. Furthermore, he has kept his two wives and their nine children in Niamey. Hassane is a devout Muslim who sees no contradiction in sending all of his children to public, secular schools because he believes French education will allow them more opportunities in modern Niger than he had. In contrast, Ibrahim and Aliou moved their wives and younger children from Niamey to Kuka.

I asked this group of middle-aged men to compare the merits of the village and the city in light of their current life plans. They all shared a love of Kuka, identifying it as a place of family, friendly neighbors, and community. They emphasized that, unlike the city, there is no need to pay for rent or food in Kuka, and that there is no stench from open sewers and festering trash heaps. Aliou mentioned, "Niamey has grown too large, we enjoy the peace and quiet here." The problem with Kuka, they concurred, is that there is almost no work during the dry season. Aliou explained, "If we could make a living solely through farming, we never would have left home." Hassane added, "But it made no sense for us to stay here with no money when we were young, strong, and ambitious." Salisou explained that the region had grown progressively drier over his lifetime, leading to increasingly frequent famines, "When my father was a child 100 years ago we had forests and many lakes dotted the region, but the one we visited today is the last permanent one that I know about, and as you can see we have few trees except for those that we have planted in the village." He added that local people from several villages fished in this lake and shared irrigation pumps to create year-round vegetable gardens, and wondered aloud what would happen if it dried up. In contrast, they highlighted the economic advantages of Niamey. Hassane explained that the city has much more work and that it is possible to establish relationships there with rich people who are willing to share their money. Salisou added, "A few Kuka men even become rich in Niamey, as you know." Several men interjected that this was counterbalanced by the expensive and rising cost of rent and food. Moctar agreed, and reminded me, "Chaibou, you know that much of the year there are more people from Kuka in Niamey than there are here, and that many of us will never live at home again. But we have managed to reconstruct our Kuka community in Niamey."

Before leaving, dozens of people greeted us, wished us a safe journey to Niamey, and invited us to return. Baso gave Sara Beth large sacks of beans and peanuts as parting gifts. We did our best to thank her and all of our hosts for their gracious hospitality. Hassane, Sara Beth, and I secured a ride in a truck back to the bus station in Dogondoutchi, and said farewell to Salisou, Aliou, Moctar, and the crowd of men, women,

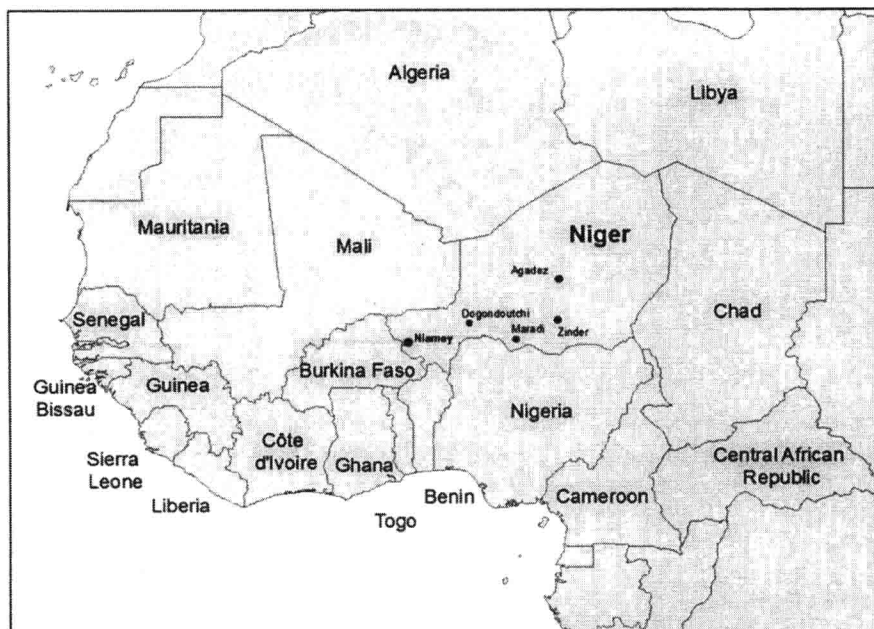


Figure 1.1 Map of Niger, created by Sara Beth Keough.

and children gathered with us by the side of the road. We faced another chaotic crunch to board the bus in Dogondoutchi, and had to sit separately. A group of tired students from Chad en route to Niamey who had already been on busses for a day and a half filled the seats between us. As I reflected on our trip, I realized that I had encountered several significant key issues, namely, hospitality, solidarity, joy, and dignity; migration, diaspora, and urban—rural connections; Islam, careers, conversation, new technologies, and economic decline. The remaining chapters of this book elaborate on these issues and their importance in the lives of contemporary Hausa in Niamey.

Structural Violence, Suffering, and Surviving with Dignity

This book explores three key interconnected themes—structural violence, suffering, and surviving with dignity—through examining the lived experiences of first and second-generation migrant Hausa men in

Niamey over the past two decades in the current neoliberal moment. Colonialism, state mismanagement, structural adjustment, and global neoliberalism have inflicted structural violence on Nigeriens by denying them human and particularly socioeconomic rights and relegating them to a status at—or very near—the bottom of the UN Human Development Index in each year of the past decade (Alidou 2005:11-14; Loftsdottir 2008:26; Masquelier 2000; Stoller 2002:17; UNHDP 2012). As a result of structural violence, most Hausa of Niamey suffer grinding and intractable poverty that has intensified over the past two decades. Suffering is a recurrent and expected condition; it is the normal condition. The central goal of the book is to explain the material (migration and informal economy work) and symbolic (meaning-making) strategies that Hausa individuals and communities have deployed in their struggles not only to literally survive in the face of economic austerity on the outer periphery of the global economy, but also to survive with dignity.

Hausa men's struggles lead to differential outcomes. Some fail and slide into anomie, isolation, depression, and even insanity. However, the fact that the majority succeeds—that is, they are surviving with dignity—is the most interesting and compelling aspect of Hausa life in Niamey. Despite daunting challenges, many Hausa men—like Hassane and his friends—find strength and patience in their humble devotion to Islam, cherish their vibrant sociability and gracious hospitality, deeply value extraordinary conversational virtuosity and knowledge, deploy humor in complex transcendent, defensive, and self-critical ways, perpetuate a sense of hope and optimism for the future, articulate their own modernities, and strive relentlessly to feel connected to the modern world at large. Indeed, for many Hausa of Niamey, “*Rashin sani ya hi duhu dare*” (“Ignorance is darker than the night”), because even a pauper can lead a life of profound intellectual and social satisfaction. *Surviving with Dignity* explains this extraordinary achievement, highlighting the remarkable resilience and subtle resistance of Hausa to annihilation by global forces and a small local elite.

My assertion that many Hausa of Niamey live fulfilling lives of dignity and joy does not avoid the “structural violence” of the neoliberal world order that has disconnected them and left them with difficult daily