



“*Tout a été loti!*”: Decentralisation, Land Speculation and Urban Expansion in Niamey, Niger

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ABSTRACT In and around Niamey, land has emerged as a central source of economic and political capital and as the object of intense competition. Land speculation has accelerated with the decentralisation of land management including zoning or land subdivision operations (*lotissement*) whereby rural land such as agricultural fields are transformed into land plots mainly for housing. The multiplication of actors involved in zoning has led to an unprecedented competition over land on the urban fringe, involving a multitude of actors including municipalities, private and public enterprises, private entrepreneurs and individual land speculators, national politicians, customary landowners and other brokers and intermediaries. With the rapid proliferation of public and private zoning operations, zoning and land management have also quickly become central question in local and municipal politics, engendering conflicts, competition and contestation. In this paper we analyse the economic, political and spatial stakes of land management in the periphery of Niamey. We show that land speculation is part of a wider struggle for political and economic influence that is reshaping local political arenas and rapidly transforming the urban periphery.

Keywords: zoning, land speculation, urban expansion, political arenas, Niamey

Introduction

When approaching Niamey, the capital of Niger, by road, several kilometers before reaching the urban agglomeration the sides of the road are dotted by signboards that mark the ownership of land including the number of the land deed or simply the name and phone number of the owner. Larger signs indicate the name of a future housing development like *Cité Émergente* (the ‘emerging city’) or *Cité ONPPC*, both located approximately 30 km from the city limit. These signs of a prospective if not immediately ‘emerging’ urbanisation are evidence of the importance of land speculation on the urban fringes of Niamey, a phenomenon that is quickly making urban plans and prognostics obsolete. “*Tout a été loti!*” [‘Everything has been zoned!], Kalidou, a long serving civil servant responsible for urban planning and land management at the town hall in Niamey, exclaimed with exasperation before continuing to explain that the territorial expansion of the urban agglomeration of Niamey projected for the year 2020 had already been surpassed in 2011. Kalidou was referring to the proliferation of zoning operations (*lotissement*) through which farming land situated on the periphery of the capital was being transformed into land plots at an unprecedented speed. Apart from tell-tale signs such the signboards described above or

the tracing of access ways, these transformations were in most cases not yet visible. This is not to say that land speculation is a new phenomenon. Rich businessmen, and politicians have a history of buying up hectares of farming land in the vicinity of Niamey, either in anticipation of the extension of the urban agglomeration or for the purpose of large-scale agriculture. However in the past decade two important reforms – politico-administrative decentralisation and the liberalisation of the (urban) land market – have given a new impetus to land speculation on the urban fringe as it has opened up the possibility of carrying out zoning operations, previously the purview of the state, to municipal councils and private actors. New (and old) actors – such as private entrepreneurs, individual land speculators, municipalities, real estate developers, real estate developers, customary landowners and other brokers and intermediaries, as well as the public authorities – are thus competing over rural land that can be transformed into land plots that are put up for sale in the near or distant future. Despite often being located at a distance from the urban agglomeration and far away from existing infrastructure networks, like water and electricity, such land plots are sought after by aspiring homeowners and upward striving urban dwellers. A land plot represents a more secure future through becoming a homeowner and they are also a favoured means of investment that at the same time secures (and grows) savings as the value is likely to increase with urban expansion. Plots are thus likely to change hands several times before someone starts building a house, usually when the urban agglomeration has drawn closer. As the urban limit is pushed outwards, mainly by zoning operations, the built environment on the urban fringe of Niamey is increasingly dominated by residential neighborhoods. This development is not exclusive to Niamey. Mercer identifies the transformation of peri-urban and rural hinterlands into residential suburbs as “[O]ne of the most striking features of contemporary African urbanism” (Mercer 2018: 1). A similar observation is made by Mabin et al. in a review article on African suburbanism where they point to the growth of zones of middle- and upper-income residence on agricultural peripheries (Mabin et al. 2013). Studies of these developments have focused on the ways in which housebuilders in the suburbs are reshaping urban space and identities (Andreasen et al. 2017; Melly 2010; Mercer 2017, 2018; Page and Sunjo 2018). In this article, by placing the focus on the actual production of land plots and on the actors and processes involved in this kind of suburban expansion in Niamey, including the underlying institutional and policy mechanisms, we seek to shed light on the political economy of urban sprawl (Bertrand 2019) in a context of decentralisation. In doing this we build on the work of other authors who have analysed the political, economic and social stakes of decentralised land management in West Africa (Bertrand 2006; Hagberg and Körling 2016; Hilgers 2008).

We start by outlining the historical role of zoning in urban development in Niger, as this is necessary for understanding not only the rapid expansion of the urban agglomeration today, but also the political and economic stakes of urban land development for residential use. Next, we move to the municipal level and discuss the centrality of land in municipalities in and around Niamey focusing on competition over land and controversies around zoning operations. Finally, we address the consequences of the rush for land in villages on the urban fringe, focusing especially on how local actors have responded to the liberalisation of urban land production and pointing to the emergence of locally based mid-level land developers.

The article is based on fieldwork carried out in one arrondissement in Niamey and one rural municipality in the vicinity of Niamey. The fieldwork was carried out in different

periods between 2006 and 2013 and consisted of interviews with peri-urban residents, municipal councillors, traditional chiefs, property developers, Ministry officials and local state agents as well as observations in municipal offices, at meetings of the municipal council and at community meetings.¹

A History of Zoning and Urban Development

In Niger as in other West African countries, zoning has since the colonial period been one of the central mechanisms of state control over land and over urban expansion and development (Bertrand 2004; Hagberg and Körling 2016; Hilgers 2008; Njoh 2006). In a Nigerien context zoning can best be defined as the process through which the ‘raw material of rural land’ is transformed into ‘urban land’, resulting in the creation of land plots for housing, industry, commerce and public facilities (Belko Maiga 1985: 61). The first zoning operations in Niger were planned and carried out by the colonial administration, the land tenure law of 1959 declaring that land in urban areas should be progressively zoned. During the colonial period zoning regulations imposed racial spatial segregation such as the separation of ‘native’ and ‘European’ districts where the latter were privileged in terms of the use of space, their location and the provision of infrastructure (Njoh 2006: 548). Njoh argues that in the post-independence period this segregation has morphed into a socio-economic segregation which privileges well serviced elite residential areas that are also considered to be the model for urban development (Njoh 2006: 554). Moreover, in the literature on Niamey, many authors point to the absence of a coherent and holistic strategy of urban planning in the face of rapid population growth and spatial expansion (Gilliard 2005; Seybou 1995). Instead, zoning operations have remained the main form of urban planning and investment which has led to a one sided and expansive urban development that has favoured the class of urban dwellers who can afford to buy a land plot leaving the poor to find refuge in informal settlements (Motcho & Adamou 2014). The imposition of urban norms and a particular urban aesthetics through building codes regulating the types of material that can be used for construction as well as the privileging of a particular spatial layout also has the potential to further exacerbate urban inequalities. At the same time, zoning operations in many cases do not conform to the state’s own norms and regulations. For instance, many publicly zoned neighbourhoods lack even the minimum of infrastructure and servicing such as access roads, a drainage system and water and electricity networks, the provision of which is stipulated in urban planning regulations. Nonetheless, zoning has remained ‘the dominant instrument for controlling land use’ and the most important tool in urban planning and management (Njoh 2006: 549). Through determining the spatial layout and use of new urban spaces, including the imposition of building codes and regulations, it has remained a central mechanism of state control. Moreover, zoning also changes the status of land bringing it into the fold of state controlled ‘modern’ land management leading to the gradual disappearance of customary land tenure (Motcho 2010: 25). Less obviously land is also through this process transformed into an important economic and political resource

¹ Körling carried out fieldwork in Saga and Municipality 4 in the framework of the project Spheres of Opposition? Democratic Culture and Local Development in West African Municipalities headed by Sten Hagberg and funded by Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Moussa Ibrahima carried out fieldwork in Liboré in the framework of the African, Power and Politics program funded by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

for state authorities and for local and national political elites (Bertrand 2006). Firstly, as pointed out by Njoh, in bringing land under state control zoning provides state authorities with a means of turning land into revenue through the sale of land plots, and through the imposition of the payment of different fees and taxes with the formalisation of land transactions (Njoh 2006: 554). Similarly, Giraut has argued that the land question in Niger has for a long time been dominated by a race to carry out zoning operations, driven by the need for authorities to raise resources for the daily running of their services, while neglecting to invest in the required infrastructure such as roads, water and electricity networks, sanitation etc., leading him to refer to such zoning operations as 'subsistence' or 'pay the bills' zoning operations ('*lotissements alimentaires*') (Giraut 1999: 22). Secondly, at the same time as the monetisation of land has supported the daily function of the state administration, it has also served to strengthen political alliances and networks through the distribution of land plots. For instance, Belko-Maïga points out that the colonial administration distributed land to local notables and partners, and the first national political parties (Sawaba and RDA/PPA) subdivided and sold land to their political clientele (Belko Maïga 1985: 200). In the post-independence period, the sale of much sought after (publicly produced) land plots has continued to be surrounded by opacity and clientelism. Thirdly, zoning operations have continuously been used by public authorities to prevent social unrest. This last point is illustrated in operations like the 2002 'land plots in exchange for salaries' ('*parcelles contre arriérés de salaires*') campaign. During the campaign 13,500 land plots were distributed to civil servants in Niamey in order to cancel out 11 months' worth of salary arrears accrued during the 1990s (Motcho and Adamou 2010: 213). Critics of this operation note that it led to the unplanned proliferation of non-serviced neighbourhoods and further fuelled land speculation as recipients in need of cash sold the land plots which they had been awarded (Motcho and Adamou 2010; Issaka 2013). Civil servants in other parts of Niger, including the military, have also benefited from similar operations.

Zoning and Municipal Politics Niamey

The gradual movement towards liberalisation and decentralisation in the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s loosened up the state monopoly on the production of urban land plots. A new urban policy was introduced in 1997 following an overview of the existing laws and regulations many of which dated back to the colonial period. The law clarified the definition of zoning as well as the procedures to be followed. In doing this it also opened up for the possibility of private zoning. A *lotisseur* was defined as a landowner, or any other public or private juridical person or body (e.g. a professional developer, landowner, municipality etc.) who had the necessary land title to carry out a zoning operation on the land in question.² Although the new law was passed in 1997 it was not until 2008, with the implementation of a new policy on urbanism and land management, that private zoning

² All zoning projects should follow the same procedure consisting of the putting together and submission of a dossier (including for instance a proof of the appropriate land titles, a topographic plan, a plan for the provision of water and electricity, the division of plots, and a map showing the location of the area etc.) to the appropriate local and national authorities. All new zoning projects have to be approved at both municipal and national levels (e.g. by the Ministry of Urbanism) and the zoning projects have to conform to the urban 'master plan' or land use plan in place in the locality in question. Significantly the *lotisseur* or developer is also responsible for development of the site (including a road network, water, electricity, public lighting etc).

took off. By this time the nationwide decentralisation reform had also been implemented following the first the local elections that were held in 2004. As part of the move to bring decisions regarding town and country planning closer to the people whom it would concern the most the prerogative to carry out zoning operations was transferred to the municipality. The encouragement of zoning by private developers, in effect liberalising the sector, had in its turn been justified by the high demand for urban land plots and by the hope that private zoning would contribute to promote processes of formal urbanisation through the production of registered land plots serviced by road, water and electricity networks.³ In the new context of decentralisation, private zoning operations were also meant to improve the revenues of municipalities.

In Niamey, decentralisation meant that power was transferred from the Urban Community of Niamey (CUN⁴) to five independent and autonomous municipalities (each headed by an elected municipal council). In this new configuration the CUN was supposed to play a coordinating role in the management of the capital. However, right from the start the transfer of power from the CUN to the municipalities was filled with tension and conflicts over access to resources, decision making, and public authority in the daily governance of the city. Not surprisingly land management and zoning was at the heart of these conflicts. The CUN had previously overseen zoning operations however the decentralisation reform transferred land management, including the prerogative to carry out zoning operations, to the newly created municipalities. Despite this, the CUN maintained that in order to ensure a harmonious development of the city, the government through a radio message had ordered the municipalities in Niamey not to initiate any zoning operations. The CUN claimed that this was decided out of concern with the potential 'abusive use' of zoning operations. There was thus a conflict between the decentralised management structure put into place in the capital according to which, as expressed by an official at the town hall, the municipalities and not the CUN should control their territory, and the de facto interdiction of municipalities to carry out zoning operations. As time passed tensions increased especially as the new municipalities created with few resources were struggling to raise revenues limiting their scope of action and possibilities of investing. For cash strapped municipalities zoning promised to at least solve some of their financial problems. Municipality 4 where Körling did fieldwork found itself in the middle of the tug of war with the CUN over zoning operations. The municipality, situated in the eastern part of Niamey, encompassed mainly peri-urban neighbourhoods and five villages. The mayor was quick to point out that the municipality had the most farming and village land available for zoning operations. For the mayor the possibility of short circuiting the CUN and carrying out their own zoning operations quickly became a central concern. The mayor and other municipal councillors talked about this period as a war with the CUN that they also accused of withholding state subventions. In 2007/8 the municipality decided to ignore the warnings of the CUN and started to plan a public zoning project on land situated on the north-eastern outskirts of the capital. The municipality managed to push through their zoning project and other projects

³ See for instance the explanation given by the Minister for Urbanism Abdoukarim Moussa Bako during a hearing on private zoning operations. Interpellation du Ministre de l'Urbanisme, du Logement et de l'Assainissement à l'Assemblée Nationale, Tamtaminfo 8 August 2012. See <http://www.tamtaminfo.com/interpellation-du-ministre-de-lurbanisme-du-logement-et-de-l-assainissement-a-lassemblee-nationale/>

⁴ Communauté Urbaine de Niamey

followed. According to the head of land affairs, a total of 4 zoning operations – counting a total of 4421 plots – had been produced during the mandate of the first municipal council. During the same period, they had also authorised more than 20 private zoning operations. In Niamey as a whole, this period saw a rapid increase of both public and private zoning operations. Meyer cites an anonymous report that suggested that the rhythm of zoning operations had increased from two per year between 2000 and 2005 to 40 per year after 2006 (Meyer 2018: 214).

However, the decentralisation reform in the capital would prove to be short lived. In 2011, following a period of military transition after the coup d'état on 18 February 2010 the administration of the capital (alongside that of Maradi, Zinder and Tahoua), was reorganised with the motivation that it would make urban management more effective. The five municipalities were transformed into arrondissements placed under the authority of the City of Niamey (the former CUN). The arrondissements would still be headed by an elected council however many of the powers that had previously been delegated to the municipalities were now returned to the City of Niamey. The arrondissements were supposed to play a consultative role to the City of Niamey for instance by submitting suggestions for investments. This meant that (the former) municipalities in Niamey lost all control over land management with the exception of the registration of customary land deeds. The land question, no doubt, played an important role in the decision to recentralise the management of the capital. The municipalities in Niamey were taxed as incompetent and accused of having carried out an excessive number of uncoordinated zoning operations (Meyer 2018: 199). While in the middle of the effervescence of land transactions in 2008 the land affairs office in Municipality 4 bustled with activities and was full of stacks of folders, in 2012 the same office was conspicuously quiet and the desk of the chief land affairs officer was empty as almost everything had been moved to the central town hall. This contrast reflects the alternation between effervescence and paralysis in the rhythm of municipal life that Bertrand describes in the case of Bamako where the state shifted between a permissive and repressive attitude in terms of the freedom given to municipalities to handle land questions (Bertrand 2006: 189).

Private Zoning Operators and Local Political Dynamics on the Urban Periphery

In the rest of this article, we will explore the impact of the opening up of land management on social and political dynamics in Saga and Liboré, two localities situated on the urban periphery of Niamey that found themselves at the heart of the competition for land. Saga, a former village located five kilometers from the center of Niamey, is the chef lieu of the canton of Saga.⁵ With the expansion of the city Saga has become completely integrated into the urban agglomeration. The area encompassed by the canton of Saga houses Niamey's industrial zone and the international airport, and farmland has gradually been transformed into residential plots, the new neighbourhoods welcoming a diverse urban population. Saga is administratively part of Arrondissement 4 (former Municipality 4). The second field site

⁵ Cantons, headed by canton chiefs, were created during the colonial period for administrative purposes. In creating cantons, the colonial power sought to use the authority and legitimacy of the pre-colonial chieftaincy, but the extent to which the canton mirrored local pre-colonial political structures and divisions varied greatly (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 141). The system of cantons and canton chiefs were maintained after independence and formed the basis for the territorial divisions made in preparation for the decentralisation reform.

Liboré is also a canton. In fact, the two cantons are contiguous to one another. Following the decentralisation reform in 2004 Liboré became a rural municipality that regroups 17 villages. In the run up to the decentralisation reform during discussions about administrative and territorial divisions Liboré was suggested as the sixth municipality in Niamey which would have formed a zone of extension for the urban agglomeration (Motcho 2004: 120) however local actors had opted out fearing that the inclusion into the Urban Community of Niamey would mean that the independence promised by decentralisation would be circumscribed. Yet given its proximity to Niamey the urban agglomeration has spilled over into Liboré with the emergence of densely inhabited peri-urban neighborhoods and the implantation of infrastructure such as the customs bureau and the fuel storage facilities of SONIDEP (*Société Nigérienne des Produits Pétroliers*)⁶ along the national highway. Other parts of the municipality situated at a greater distance from the urban agglomeration have remained mainly rural in character. Agriculture, including the cultivation of rice in the hydro-agricultural scheme which they share with Saga, livestock keeping, and fishing are still important economic activities. However, land speculation in an around Niamey has led to a rapid alienation of farming land the full consequences of which are yet to be seen.

In the following sections we will focus on how local actors in Saga and Liboré have responded to decentralisation and to the liberalisation of urban land production. The emergence of large-scale property developers and zoning operators like rich businessmen and traders has been documented in previous studies in Niamey (Issaka 2013, Meyer 2018) and in neighbouring Bamako (Bertrand 2019). However, as we will show in the following portraits of three kinds of emerging private zoning entrepreneurs, private zoning operators are a diverse group including many mid-level actors driven by different motivations who manage to pool political and economic resources to be able to develop land.

The Traditional Chief

In 2008, Körling was doing fieldwork in Saga. Interested in the history of urban expansion and its effects on village land she was talking to a village chief about the question of expropriation in the case of public zoning operations. Since 1995, customary landowners receive 25% in compensation for land used for zoning or other forms of public utility. Prior to that they had received a derisory amount and at times nothing – like the one symbolic franc (*franc symbolique*) offered in exchange for land by the colonial administration – for land expropriated by the state. Public zoning operations have remained a point of contention as compensation has many times proven to be unreliable. The chief underlined that sometimes the compensation is withheld for long periods and he claimed that the authorities tended to give customary landowners the least attractive land plots far away from the main access roads or on uneven terrain. For many customary landowners parcelling out and selling land on the parallel land market independent of the public authorities was a way of protecting their land from the claims of the state and from urban encroachment. Subsequently, in the shadow of the state monopoly on urban land management, the allocation or sale of land by customary landowners from peri-urban villages has been an important dynamic in the growth of the city ever since the start of formal zoning operations during the colonial period in the 1950s (Belko Maiga 1985). Importantly, the parceling out of land by customary land owners has

⁶ The parastatal Nigerian petroleum products company.

made it possible for urban residents with limited economic resources to become homeowners as land plots sold by customary land owners are cheaper and more easily accessible than plots sold by the state/municipality or by private property developers (Körling 2013, 2020). In Niamey chiefs and customary landowners have thus played a similar role in the 'opening up' of urban borders as described by De Boeck (2020) in Kinshasa. However, authorities consider this practice of parcelling out and selling land as 'illegal' as it does not follow urban land regulations and complicates the planning of the city. The neighbourhoods that emerge from such 'informal' zoning operations thus find themselves in a legal limbo (Körling 2020). During their conversation the chief pulled out a map of a subdivision and explained that he had recently submitted a private zoning project to the municipality and was now waiting for the decision of the urban commission at the Ministry. He had been alerted to the possibility of initiating a private zoning operation by a relative who used to work at the municipality and who according to the chief "knows all of the circuits". The land in question was situated in the vicinity of one of the few villages that had yet to be reached by the urban agglomeration and that was also coveted by the municipality. The zoning project would transform 12 hectares of farming land into 199 land plots (each measuring between 300 and 500 square meters). To put together the application for the zoning operation the chief had paid for the services of an expert at the Ministry who also assisted the municipality in preparing zoning operations. In order to get the application (including the cadastral plan) ready to be submitted to the municipality he had paid the 'consultant' 1,000,000 FCFA (1,524 euros). The chief pointed out that it had been a long and costly process, that also included the informal distribution of land plots to officials, but that he had been helped by his numerous 'relations' at the municipality and the Ministry of Urbanism.

Private zoning offered an opportunity to professionalise, formalise and rescale the practice of parcelling out land. Although private zoning provided a new means of ensuring control of inherited land - in the face of growing pressure for zoning from the municipality and from external private entrepreneurs, the quite onerous procedures for carrying out zoning operations posed a hinder for most customary landowners who did not have the necessary resources and connections. It was thus no coincidence that one of the first local private zoning operators came from the traditional chieftaincy. Given that land prior to being zoned was regulated by customary land tenure, the chiefs held an advantageous position in this new configuration. Rural land tenure laws in Niger give the traditional chieftaincy a central role in attesting customary landownership and granting private property rights. Although the *Code rural* – an extensive land tenure reform drawn up in the late 1980s and adopted in 1993 – sought to modernise and democratise rural land management through the creation of land commissions - the fact that the granting of property rights was made with reference to customary rights and to 'collective memory', meant that an important role was given to the traditional chieftaincy – the canton chief – as the central authority (Lund & Hesseling 1999: 136). In sum, the case of the village chief illustrates the privileged position of the chieftaincy with the opening-up for new economic opportunities through large scale land development and land plot production.

The Politician-Entrepreneur

In Liboré private zoning operations and the rapid alienation of farming land became a central question in the municipality. Land transactions were a source of revenue for the municipality.

For instance, in 2010 the municipality gained around 15,000,000 FCFA from the signing of 600 land transfer deeds (at 25,000 CFA a piece). However, the rapid transformation of land would prove difficult to control. The proliferation of privately initiated zoning operations meant that competition over land was fierce sometimes blocking the municipality's own zoning projects. At a meeting (of the municipal council that Ibrahima observed in 2011) land was a central topic of discussion. Participants raised concern about what they considered to be an excessive alienation of agricultural land in what was still a predominantly rural municipality which was compounded by the fact that most private zoning operations had been carried out without the necessary infrastructure networks and investments. Moreover, many private zoning operations were surrounded by conflicts and opacity. Land disputes both within the municipality and with neighbouring municipalities had increased and few zoning operations had followed the required administrative procedures many lacking the necessary authorizations from the Ministry. During the meeting the canton chief expressed his concern over the rapid alienation of land and the increase in land disputes (and warned about the consequences of irregular private zoning operations "All I know is that what we are doing now will catch up with us either sooner or later.") However, in the end no actions were taken to limit or improve the control of the local authorisation of private zoning operations. In fact, some of the municipal councillors had themselves become private zoning operators or property developers and deftly manoeuvred in the debate. One municipal councillor exclaiming "...we are ourselves developers. Even if we stop, other people will continue."

The trajectory of the municipal councillor Zakou illustrates the emergence of these politician-entrepreneurs who had managed to take advantage of the decentralisation and the liberalisation of the land market. Zakou who was in his fifties had worked as a tax collector in one of the central markets in Niamey. He entered the municipal council the first mandate following the implementation of the decentralization reform in 2004 when he was elected as a municipal councillor in Liboré through the IBL (*Mouvement des indépendants bâtisseurs de Liboré*) ('the movement of the independent builders of Liboré'), a local independent party that controlled the municipality during the first municipal mandate. Zakou had used his position on the municipal council to build up a business through the acquisition of public contracts, at first for the delivery of stationary and other similar products to the municipal office and later for larger contracts including the construction of classrooms, the delivery of desks and chairs, and even the construction of the municipal office. In 2007-8 when private zoning started to take off he decided to launch himself into the property development business, setting himself up as an estate agent in the same 30 square meter office as his building company. His first foray into the property market was carried out in collaboration with other 'mid-level' land buyers and customary landowners who together owned six farming (millet) fields that made up 22 hectares of land situated in a prime location close to the national highway. Through the zoning operation the fields were divided up into 454 land plots. Having already managed to start a successful business with the help of his political position private zoning represented an opportunity for the expansion of his entrepreneurial activities building on already established networks. Thanks to his position as municipal councillor Zakou was well placed to procure the necessary papers and signatures and managed to draw on his position to transform political capital into economic capital.

In Liboré, the participation of municipal councillors like Zakou in private zoning operations put them in conflict with the interests of the municipality as public and private

interests collided. At the same time as municipal councillors were supposed to regulate land development and zoning in the municipality, they were in their role as land speculators, entrepreneurs and developers central actors in fuelling land transformations illustrating the imbrication of politics and land speculation.

Village youth

The emergence of a land market also opened up economic opportunities for new categories of actors including youth who became intermediaries, resellers and even private zoning entrepreneurs. This was particularly evident in Liboré where the creation of the municipality had set off an increasing return of the quite sizeable diaspora enticed by the opportunities of investment proffered by decentralization. The land market offered a rare investment opportunity in a context marked by a dearth of economic opportunities and a difficulty of finding employment and of raising capital even for small scale business ventures. As natives of Liboré they had access to farming land through negotiations with their extended family allowing them to get started in the land development business without a lot of economic capital. Furthermore, thanks to their formal education they were able to navigate the administrative and technical procedures. The emergence of youth as new private zoning operators is exemplified in the case of Souleyman (with a degree in banking) and Seydou (a returning migrant).

Momouni who was in his forties had studied banking in Cameroon. On his return to Niger he had gotten an internship at a bank in Niger. This was also when he had entered the 'real-estate business'. To do this he had created a company that specialized in private zoning with some friends of his who contributed with economic capital, their knowledge of the administration and land. Souleyman underlined that in order to succeed as a private zoning operator you needed to be generous (altruistic) to collaborators including associated customary landowners and municipal agents, be willing to take risks and anticipate the actions of the municipality and the state. Seydou another emerging private zoning operator was also in his forties and had lived in the UK. He interspersed his speech with English expressions such as 'I mean' and drove a car with the steering wheel on the left-hand side that he had brought with him from the UK. On a visit back home Seydou had realised that the value of land was increasing rapidly. He had launched himself in private zoning by using land that belonged to his extended family. The family had entrusted him with the task of getting all the necessary papers together, including the proof of customary ownership, and had given him the mandate to carry out the zoning operation. This first zoning operation proved successful and Seydou decided to continue in the business of private zoning by buying farming land and cooperating with other midlevel land speculators, including customary landowners and resellers. He eventually succeeded in expanding his operations to neighbouring municipalities in the same Department (Kollo) and beyond (for instance in Dosso) and created his own successful real estate business. For Seydou private zoning provided an opportunity to return home by building up a profitable business. When talking about the start of his business Seydou used the Zarma proverb 'one should start training to become a butcher using one's father's cow'. In using this proverb Seydou underlined that in starting a new activity it was best to use one's own resources to avoid being indebted to someone in case the new venture would fail. Whereas Seydou launched into a career as property developers other one-time zoning operators used the profits to buy cars or to open

a new business. These young entrepreneurs from the urban periphery could build on family relations and other connections in negotiating access to farming land which quickly had become a prime commodity.

In becoming private zoning operators, the village chief, Zakou, Seydou and Souleyman all managed to take advantage of decentralisation and the liberalisation of the urban land sector. However, the quite onerous procedures for carrying out zoning operations posed a hinder for many customary landowners who did not have the necessary economic resources and connections in the administration. As pointed out by Neimark et al. the possibility for customary landowners in peri-urban areas to participate in the formalisation of land and to benefit from the transformation of farming land into housing plots is dependent on their access to knowledge of administrative procedures, economic resources and political power (Neimark et al. 2018). The portraits of the three types of locally based mid-level zoning operators is thus also revelatory of the stratification of opportunities to capitalise on liberalisation of the urban land market.

Conclusion

The future of cities in Africa is in large part determined by what happens on the urban fringe, as peri-urban spaces are “one of the fastest growing geographical locations in the global south” (Neimark et al. 2018: 320). In Niamey formal urban expansion into peri-urban areas has in the past and today been driven by zoning operations through which rural agricultural land has been transformed into urban land plots. Hence, in order to understand urban expansion in Niamey it is necessary to understand the history. Zoning has since the colonial period been a central mechanism for the control of urban space and the imposition of a set of urban norms that through the creation of residential neighbourhoods mainly cater to the middle and upper class. The problems and contradictions in this form of urban development has been exacerbated by the political and economic stakes of zoning operations which has led to an excessive creation of land plots to finance the operations of central and regional and governments and satisfy a political clientele. Political decentralisation and liberalisation while opening up urban land management that was previously firmly in the hands of the state to municipal councillors and other non-state actors has done little to remediate this situation. Although it does mark a shift in the exercise of public authority over urban development and expansion there are also many continuities. As we have seen, land (through zoning operations) has continuously played an important role as a political and economic resource, first for the state and regional authorities and then for the newly created municipalities, and finally for the diversity of actors who have capitalized on the liberalization of land management. Although the multiplication of zoning operations has facilitated access to urban land - for those who can afford it – it will do little to attenuate the housing crisis (Issaka 2013: 2). Instead, it could be argued that it has heightened the importance of peri-urban land as source of economic and political capital leading to a competition over farming land that has fuelled urban expansion and that has had important consequences for the reconfiguration of local political arenas. While inadvertently strengthening old power holders like the traditional chieftaincy, the urban land reforms also created opportunities for new groups to emerge as in the case of the young zoning operators. Municipal councillors, in particular in Liboré, also emerged as key players, their private projects putting them in direct conflict with municipal policies and ‘public interest’. While opening up new opportunities

for customary land owners, whose room for action in the past in the face of urban expansion was limited to the informal parcelling out of land, as well as previously marginalised actors (like the young entrepreneurs in Liboré), to benefit from the formal transformation of farming land into urban land plots, the rapid proliferation of zoning operations has mainly served the elite at the local and national level through the imbrication of economic and political interests.

Finally, although municipalities in and around Niamey have been important actors as both zoning operators and as regulators of private zoning operations, they seem to be increasingly marginalised in the face of a poorly controlled liberalisation. As private zoning operations have become ubiquitous, large-scale private zoning entrepreneurs, usually well placed in the national political machinery as important financial backers to political parties, have taken the upper hand over public zoning actors (Issaka 2013; Meyer 2018). A similar development has been observed by Bertrand in the case of Bamako where "individuals or private companies beat the public authorities at their own game of housing development" (Bertrand 2019: 278). In Niger, as both public and private zoning operations in urban agglomerations around the country multiplied zoning quickly became a topic of debate at local and national levels, often in association with scandals of corruption or mismanagement. At one point in 2010, during the military transition, all zoning operations were suspended. A suspension that was justified by the excessive number of public and private zoning operations on the peripheries of urban centres that did not respond to a real need for urban land. However, the suspension was soon lifted. Since then the need for a more effective regulation of zoning operations has frequently been discussed. Finally, in 2018 the Minister of Urbanism announced that private zoning operations would be prohibited and that only the Ministry and the municipalities would be able to initiate zoning operations. It remains to be seen how effective this decision will be as the future of the urban periphery hangs in the balance.

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