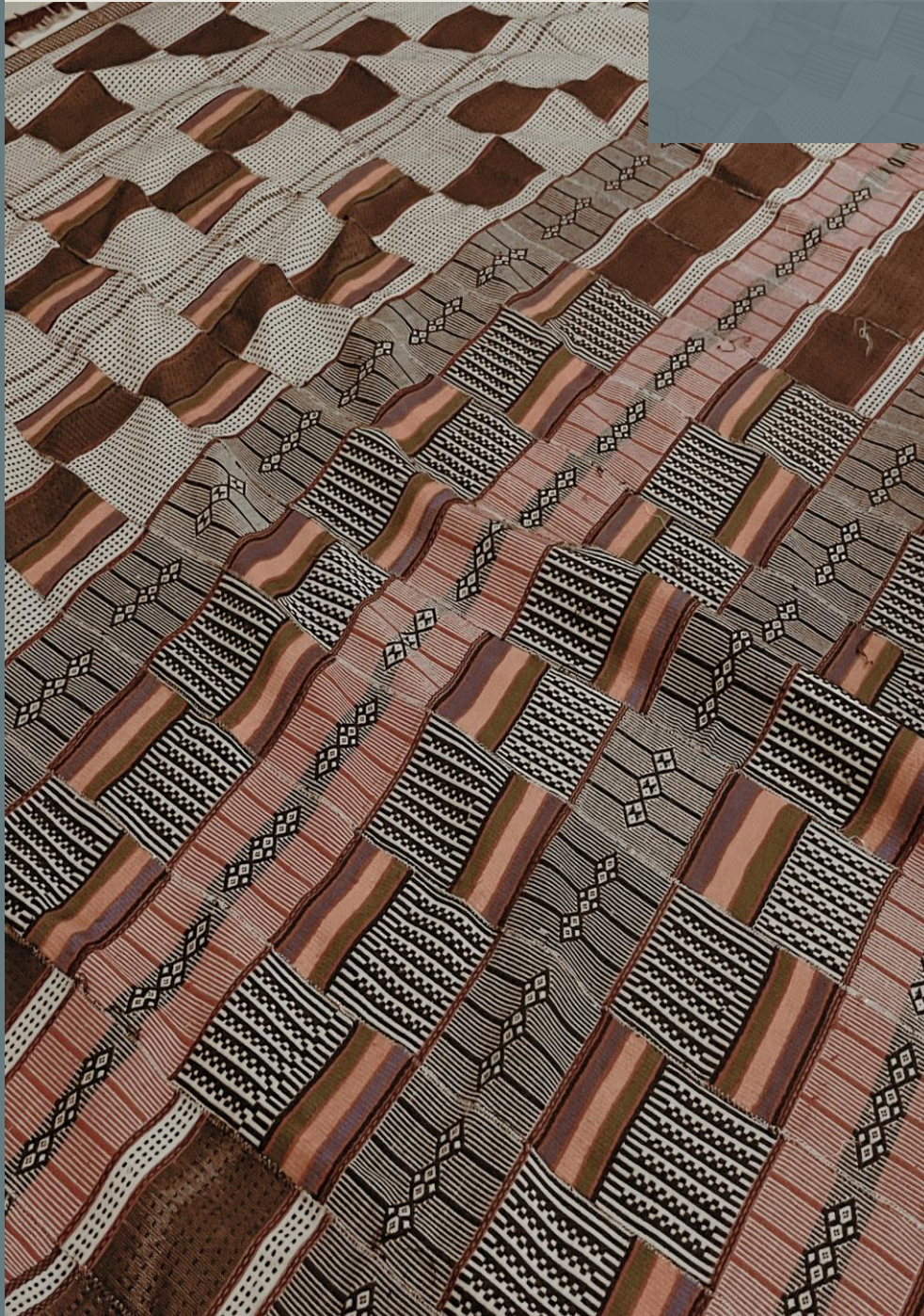


Cultural blind spots in conflict resolution in Niger and the Sahel

Antje Herrberg

Recognising traditional dynamics to better support local mediators



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy report examines how cultural blind spots shape international engagement in conflict transformation in Niger and the wider Sahel. Drawing on in-depth interviews with customary authorities, women mediators, youth leaders, former rebels, local researchers and civil society actors, it exposes the epistemic assumptions and linear western frameworks that often obscure local peace logics. Although it seems like it to some, the Sahel region is not just a peripheral security theatre. Indeed, it is one of the world's most revealing mirrors for the limits to western peace models. Here, authority is dispersed, legitimacy is relational and conflict transformation is not institutionally engineered but socially lived across overlapping and heterarchical spaces.

Rather than treating mediation as a universal technical instrument, this report highlights how speech, silence, memory, posture and relational practices determine whether conflict de-escalates or endures. It calls for an approach to peace support that is slower, more reflective and grounded in local epistemologies, where listening and presence are the central method. It concludes with recommendations for donors, international organisations and diplomatic actors seeking more honest, grounded and responsible engagement in the Sahel.



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
AES	<i>Alliance des Etats du Sahel</i> (Alliance of Sahel States)
CSDP	(European Union) Common Security and Defence Policy
EUCAP	European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger
EUMPM	European Union Military Partnership Mission
HACP	<i>Haute Autorité pour la Consolidation de la Paix</i> (High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace)
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IS-Sahel	Islamic State in the Sahel
JNIM	<i>Jam'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin</i> (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims)
LASDEL	<i>Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local</i> (Laboratory of Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development)
UN	United Nations



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1 Introduction

“If you do not listen to the silences, you will never hear the truth”.

Background: A personal journey

Between January 2023 and July 2025, I lived and worked in Niger, experiencing it from dual positions – first as chief of staff within a European civilian mission¹, then as a researcher while accompanying my husband on his diplomatic posting. This duality immersed me in two realities: on the one hand, I was part of an institutional machinery and diplomatic logic; on the other, I was attentive to what the country could teach me, attuned and wide open to local voices and the stories, gestures and silences that weave through the everyday fabric of Nigerien society.

In 2022, before I left for Niger, a friend from Mauritania confided that: “...the Sahel is a great secret; you have to be able to listen and feel beyond what is said.” That mysterious, poetic sentence stayed with me throughout my stay in the region. It resonated with what I was living: the sense that beyond appearances, beyond analytical frameworks or imported intervention models, there exists a hidden, richly layered society that reveals itself only to those who take the time to slow down.

Even if unwanted, I had the rare luxury of time in my professional life which was a blessing for my understanding of conflict then and now. I was

allowed to enjoy the luxury of genuine attention: to sit and listen at length, to sense the cadence of a conversation, to wait for a silence to open and reveal its meaning. Time flowed differently, compelling me to step out of the haste of international missions and into another temporality: one in which conflict transformation is not linear but a rich interplay of multiple approaches and entangled authorities, operating below the surface of negotiations.

In this unexpected new universe, I felt that logic does not always follow the straight lines of western models. Traditional, religious and political authorities are not so cleanly tiered; they overlap, sometimes contradict, and most often complement one another. Discourse circulates like a living cloth, woven from stories, customs and proverbs – but also from silences, heavy with meaning and old resistances.

The texture of this discourse revealed itself through the discussions I had with traditional leaders, community mediators, members of local NGOs, former rebels, women leaders, journalists and Nigerien researchers. All gave generously of their time, energy and memory. This provided a multifaceted prism of ideas. Whilst one interlocutor told me: “Here, conflict is spoken before it is resolved; you must give words to it before you give solutions,” a woman mediator confided: “If you don’t listen to the silences, you will never hear the truth.” Both simple and profound, these lines forced me to recognise my own blind spots as an enquirer, the ones we all possess and carry when we seek to “analyse” or “intervene” from the outside.

As a scholar and researcher, I arrived at this research process with tools, readings and analytical frameworks honed over decades in the social sciences and the field of peace mediation. It did not take long to realise that these did not always help me to see; in a way, they formed a screen that obscured what I was seeking. But I

realised that the Sahel, and particularly Niger, did not allow itself to be confined within those universal models of conflict resolution. What really matters here are invisible interactions, heterogeneous configurations of authority and the circulation of speech that is at once fluid and coded.

When we thus speak of blind spots in mediation or conflict transformation, we enter a terrain that resists orthodox methods. Blind spots are not just analytical omissions. They are what remains outside our field of perception – the unseen contours shaped by language and positionality. They persist because they are ours. They inhabit the very lenses through which we look. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) reminds us, these absences are not voids, but products of epistemic systems: realities rendered invisible by the structures of knowing themselves. To perceive them, we must first recognise that the very framework of our perception is, of course, partial and conditioned. Working with such blind spots is not about a new method but about cultivating a new posture. It is a practice of turning the gaze upon ourselves and rendering visible the structures that shape what we can see and say. It is what Pierre Bourdieu (1992) called “reflexive sociology”. It demands that we as the enquirers stand in the space between knowing and not knowing, and that we allow this uncertainty to do its own work.

This is not just an intellectual exercise. It is both ethical and relational. Seeing differently requires us to be seen differently, that is, engaging in a dialogue that unsettles, listens from the margins, welcomes the dissonance that comes when the unexpected happens without interrupting the flow. Shedding light on blind spots is not a solitary act of discovery but a shared act of encounter.

I hence chose to write the original version of this report in French (also published by the Berghof Foundation), because it included nuances and stories that were given to me in this language. I feel that this is also a way of acknowledging that research is done not only with imported concepts but with the words, voices and imaginations of the context itself – even if I did not succeed in

capturing them in Hausa, Zarma or Tamasheq (although the study participants were able to do so in French, the language in which most were educated).

Purpose of this paper

This research is not only an academic exercise, but the traces of an immersion. It seeks to remind us that understanding the dynamics of peace in Niger, in the Sahel, in Africa and elsewhere requires attention to language, culture and the complexity of social relations. It also reminds us that we – international researchers and practitioners – carry significant blind spots, and that recognising them is the first step toward seeing otherwise.

The report hence has a threefold purpose. With awareness of the literature in the field of conflict resolution, it first exposes several blind spots that may limit international and national peacebuilding efforts in Niger and the wider Sahel, those unexamined assumptions that obscure local meanings of conflict and reconciliation. It then reveals the local epistemologies and relational logics through which Nigerien actors, such as chiefs, women mediators, youth leaders and religious figures, navigate dispute and sustain coexistence. Building on these insights, it argues in favour of a different mode of engagement, one that is slow, trust-based, co-creative, grounded in mutual learning rather than technical delivery. The report concludes with policy recommendations for mediation and peace support actors that emphasise adaptive, locally anchored and reflexive practice.

Methodology

This research was conceived as a participatory, action-oriented inquiry into local cultures of conflict resolution in Niger, also because I was intrigued by the work conducted in the field of anthropology. Access to tacit knowledge depends not only on asking the right questions but on building trust, being introduced by others, and listening long enough for deeper meanings to surface. Rather

than one-way interviewing, the aim was to facilitate conversations that allowed mutual learning and exchange. I asked about how conflicts get resolved, who resolves them and how these instances are recognised; about where one can learn from these approaches and how they are understood by the non-indigenous/international community, how scholars study mediation in Africa, etc. (see methodological note).

Between January and July 2025, I conducted 20 formal in-depth interviews, whilst additionally holding many informal conversations since starting my research in June 2024. Each encounter began with a brief presentation of who I am, my experience in Niger and elsewhere, and why I was interested in learning about the participant's perspectives (see the Annex for research approach). This helped to foster trust and to show that I was not approaching them as a stranger extracting data but as someone sincerely seeking to listen and understand.

Two types of dialogues followed: structured dialogues, mainly with people ready for a more formal exchange, often in cities or professional settings, which were recorded with consent; and open conversations, more frequent in other places and informal settings, where discussion unfolded naturally after a single opening question, but with no recording. These typically lasted 40 to 90 minutes.

Participants were invited to sign a consent form specifying how their contributions would be used. Some found this formality unusual, but once signed, it lent legitimacy and seriousness to the exchange. Those who preferred not to sign were nonetheless heard; their reflections enriched my overall understanding and notes, without being cited directly.

Over time – through repeated exchanges and trusted introductions – conversations opened windows onto a traditionally guarded corpus of Islamic inspiration (*'ilm al-asrār*) rarely shared with outsiders. Access to this kind of knowledge requires patience, trust and a certain “legitimacy”, often transmitted by introduction from those already recognised and respected. Once established, access expands through a snowball

effect, with new conversations leading to further references and deeper insights.

It is essential to underline that from this vantage point, the researcher's role is not only to be the custodian of such knowledge but also to translate and transmit it responsibly so that it can benefit others engaged in conflict resolution, while respecting its cultural depth.

This approach combines structured rigour with openness, ethical safeguards with relational trust. It sits at the crossroads of two research traditions: how global conflict management models “travel” into local contexts, and how local practices travel toward the production of global knowledge.

The work I conducted moves between these poles: it begins with local dialogical encounters yet remains in constant conversation with broader research. The desired result is not abstract generalisation but an attempt to reveal philosophies and interpretive frameworks that shape how conflicts are understood and resolved from different vantage points.

By listening attentively and engaging ethically, researchers can uncover not only practices but also the *Weltanschauung* that inform them. Conflict resolution then appears not merely as a set of techniques but as the reflection of deeply rooted theological, cultural and philosophical logics.

In this way, the choice of a more impressionistic and associative writing style is itself part of the methodological approach. Writing becomes a way of revealing blind spots. Standardised narratives often smooth out uncertainty, emotion and ambiguity; yet it is often within these spaces that meaning resides. By allowing impressions, fragments and shifts of perception to appear on the page, the text mirrors the fluid and relational character of knowledge. I thus invite readers to move through the material as one might through an encounter: attentive, responsive and aware that understanding is always partial and in motion.

2 Literature review and conceptual framework

Cultural blind spots in mediation

It can be argued that universalist approaches to (peace) mediation – by structured western models – remain oblivious to what I call cultural blind spots. These arise when mediation ignores the symbolic, linguistic or identity dynamics that organise local solutions (LeBaron 2003; Richmond 2011). In the absence of these dimensions, international diagnoses and interventions risk being inappropriate, even counterproductive (Mac Ginty 2008). I believe these blind spots stem from two major roots: (1) colonialism and the persistence of thought that marginalises endogenous knowledge systems; and (2) the historically dominant positivism in the social sciences, which rejects what cannot be rendered as measurable, universal variables (Mamdani 2012; Ferguson 1990). Authors and practitioners such as Autesserre (2014) and Richmond (2013) argue for more contextual approaches to peace that move away from western procedural formats. These perspectives elevate roles often perceived as minor (elders, women, informal mediators) and value dynamics that resist standardisation – approaches sometimes described as “hybrid” (Boege et al. 2009). These systems of conflict resolution can “potentially be more beneficial and just for the affected population”, provided they are performed in a just manner (Galvanek and Planta 2017: 38).

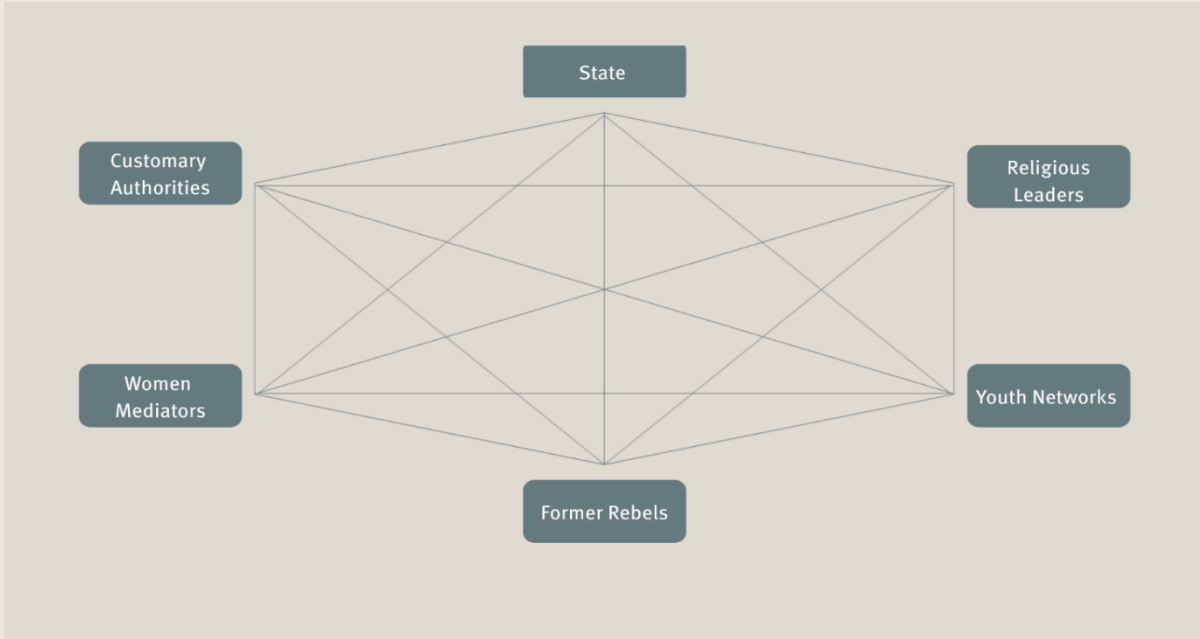
The concept of heterarchy

The idea of “heterarchy”, drawn from the sociology of complex systems, stands opposed to classical hierarchy. In a heterarchy, multiple forms of authority coexist, overlap, neutralise one another at times, and at other times reinforce each other but without a fixed order of superiority (Cilliers 1998; Stark 2001). Developed notably by German academic anthropologist and Sahel expert Georg Klute in his work on Mali and Libya, the concept allows us to move beyond fixed hierarchies and to think of political and social orders as fluid systems marked by the coexistence and interaction of different authorities – state, customary, religious and those stemming from armed movements – and how these intertwine without any one claiming exclusive sovereignty (Klute 2013).

In the Sahel, this concept is particularly relevant: the state, traditional authorities, religious leaders, NGOs and international actors operate according to logics that are sometimes contradictory yet often complementary; no monolithic order prevails (Richmond 2013). Heterarchy helps make sense of this shifting interlacing of legitimacies and illuminates how local mediation works – far from western linear schemas.

Recognising cultural blind spots and heterarchy thus leads us to recast peace mediation not as a sequence of externally controlled, hierarchical steps but as a fluid relational fabric in which peace is built in the interstices of authority. Mediation – or conflict transformation – becomes an art of connection, combining listening, flexibility and cultural sensitivity (Lederach 1997; Autesserre 2014, 2021).

FIGURE 1: HETERARCHY WEB



GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ASSOCIATION OF TRADITIONAL CHIEFS IN NIGER; ATTENDED BY THE MINISTER OF INTERIOR MOHAMED TOUMBA © MINISTRY OF INTERIOR OF NIGER 2025

3 Context: Nigerien governance, customary authorities, security and conflict resolution

Governance and customary authorities

In Niger, local governance results from an entanglement of state institutions, customary authorities and religious resources. Many works of the Nigerien Research Centre *Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local* (LASDEL) in Niger show that the “real” state is exercised less through formal rules than through practical norms and situated arrangements: configurations where prefects, mayors, traditional chiefs, notables, associations and public agents continuously negotiate the production of collective goods (de Sardan 2011; de Sardan and Alou 2009).

Before and after state decentralisation, chieftaincies have remained central to social regulation (land, pastoralism, dispute mediation). Syntheses by Olivier de Sardan and Tidjani Alou

(2009) document this centrality and its ambivalences: strong social legitimacy but incomplete and often politicised integration into the state apparatus.

Since 2010, and again in 2015, reforms have formally integrated the chieftaincy into the administrative architecture: chiefs constitute a special corps participating in the centralisation and distribution of local authority. In practice, this recognition has not abolished the plurality of registers: customary legitimacy continues to weigh heavily in conflict arbitration and access to justice (Clingendael 2019).

It is here that a hierarchy/heterarchy lens becomes operative. Rather than a clear pyramid, we observe a heterarchical system in which state, customary, religious and associative authorities coexist and intersect contextually. The “eight modes of local governance” described by Olivier de Sardan (2011) help explain the everyday diversity of power logics.

What is the implication for peace mediation? Ignoring this interwoven architecture means missing the “interfaces” where decisions are actually forged: chieftaincies and Notables² for social legitimisation, municipal services for administrative acts, and religious figures for moral acceptability.

Security context (2023–2025) and international action

Since the July 2023 coup, the security and international partnership landscape in Niger has been profoundly reconfigured. France closed its diplomatic presence and had to withdraw troops by late December 2023, bluntly ending its set-up in Niamey (Reuters 2023). On the European side, the

mandates of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy Missions (EUCAP³ Sahel Niger) and the Military Mission (EUMPM) were terminated at the request of the Nigerien authorities in December 2023 and consequently were not renewed by the EU in May 2024 (European Council 2024).

The United States had to withdraw forces and equipment from bases 101 (Niamey) and 201 (Agadez) in summer 2024, following the cancellation of the defence cooperation agreement (AFRICOM 2024). Germany withdrew its presence unilaterally in December 2024, while Italy managed to realign its military relationship with Niger. Regionally, Niger joined Mali and Burkina Faso in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which announced the creation of a joint force in response to the rise in violence linked to Jam'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM⁴) and IS-Sahel.

For the EU, several analysts note that the withdrawal of missions weakens accumulated relational capital and granular field knowledge while also complicating follow-up on initiated projects and reforms (Marangio 2024).

The Sahelian security situation today is opaque if not obscure. Rural and border areas are largely inaccessible to observers, researchers and even many humanitarian actors, making objective assessment difficult. The military coups whose proclaimed aims are to restore state authority have not in themselves brought the promised stability; jihadist violence is spreading, and security governance remains fragmented. As Wilén (2025, 9) from Egmont Institute notes, “silence in the Sahel does not equate to stability”. Indeed, the absence of reliable information certainly does not mean the absence of conflict. Added to this is a heavy colonial and postcolonial legacy in which international intervention (French, American and European Union) has shaped more of a space of security dependence rather than autonomy. The rejection and progressive withdrawal of these forces accentuates the perceived vacuum while pushing local authorities to seek new alliances. These dynamics, in turn, coincide with mass displacement, demographic upheavals and a climate of diffuse fear and stress that reconfigures daily life as much as structures of authority. Insecurity in the Sahel must thus be understood not as a fixed given but as a moving, contested and

deeply uncertain reality. This volatility highlights the hybridity of security orders where fragile state institutions, local authorities and customary regulations coexist and collide.

In this setting, international stabilisation efforts face a double limitation: the inability to generate genuine endogenous legitimacy when supporting local mechanisms of social cohesion, and the difficulty of grasping the cultural and symbolic dimensions of conflict resolution, often opaque to external actors. Durable stability can emerge only by consolidating social fabrics and articulating state interventions with these local practices. The partial rejection of an international presence can thus be read as the consequence of overinvesting in formal institutional devices, sometimes at the expense of approaches sensitive to local dynamics and rooted modes of legitimation. The following subsection shows how the cultural dimensions of conflict regulation are both an asset and a barrier for international actors in the Sahel.

Cultural dimensions in conflict resolution in the Sahel and Niger

Conflict analysis and resolution in the Sahel cannot be dissociated from the specific cultural contexts that shape modes of authority, negotiation and mediation. Ethnologists and sociologists have shown that social and political logics in the region unfold according to distinct regimes of governance, often far from western institutional models. Spittler (1993), through ethnographic work on the Tuareg and Sahelian societies, highlights the importance of customary dynamics, kinship networks and informal negotiation practices in regulating local tensions. Conflict is not merely the existence of opposing positions; it is a social practice embedded in complex relational structures.

Nigerien and Sahelian scholars such as de Sardan and Alou (2009), in studying local powers in Niger, show that customary, religious and administrative authorities form interlocking and shifting constellations. Decentralisation, far from simplifying lines of authority, renders them more

heterogeneous, forcing both communities and mediators to navigate hybrid systems.

From this vantage point, different ways of perceiving politics of international intervention are clearly present, yet they rarely receive the attention they deserve. Cultural dimensions – meaning the circulation of speech, the value of silence, customs linked to mediation, and the recognition of traditional authority figures – are indispensable elements for understanding peace dynamics. Regarding “hybrid political orders”, Boege et al. (2009) argue that social order rests on the coexistence of customary, religious and state norms, calling for approaches that are flexible and attentive to local logics.

This ethnological and sociological gaze leads to a central conclusion: analysing Niger and the Sahel (or other regions) requires moving beyond strictly institutional or security grids and entering a cultural and relational reading of conflict. It is within this perspective that the present research situates itself, mobilising formal interviews and informal conversations with Nigerien actors to identify the cultural foundations, customary mechanisms and emergent practices of conflict resolution.



PEULS (TRADITIONAL PASTORAL HERDERS) IN CEREMONIAL DRESS AT THE FESTIVAL DES CIVILISATIONS DU FLEUVE NIGER
© ANTJE HERRBERG 2025

4 Portrait of actors and cross-cutting impressions

Using the interviews I collected in Niger (see methodological notes), I conducted a comparative discourse analysis to identify recurrences, contrasts and blind spots across varied actor profiles, including customary chiefs, women mediators, institutional officials, NGO members, former rebels and local researchers. The aim was to identify common and differentiated dynamics structuring customary governance, conflict management and perceptions of international interventions.

I would also like to share that the interviews and conversations moved me equally on an emotional level. Behind each word, I felt a quiet courage and a will to build but also fractures and heavy historical legacies. I remember the dense silence of some responses, the looks more eloquent than phrases. It is this tapestry of experiences, memories and voices I wish to transmit here, for it forms the heart of this work: a meeting space between research, listening and intimate lived reality.

This section presents the main cross-cutting insights drawn from my interviews with customary chiefs, women mediators, youth activists, former combatants and institutional actors. Despite their diversity, several strong patterns emerged. First, the weight of history and the centrality of customary speech: the spoken words remain the primary tool of regulation, a space where memory, responsibility and repair are negotiated.

Second, the decisive yet increasingly fragile role of traditional authorities is caught between community expectations and political pressures.

Third, there is the importance of actors who seem largely invisible, especially women, who intervene precisely where tensions first arise, often before they become open conflicts.

A fourth recurring theme concerns collective memories of past conflicts, which continue to influence perceptions, mistrust and hopes. These memories also shape reactions to external actors, whose approaches are often viewed as misaligned with local realities.

Taken together, these tendencies, which are revealed through the voices and lived experiences shared in the interviews, form the analytical foundations of the more detailed discussion that follows.

The weight of history and customary speech

From my arrival in 2023, I sensed that speech in the Sahel is never trivial. It is offered slowly, with modesty, and carries the memory of wounds as well as possible reconciliations. Speech becomes a space of negotiation and mutual recognition.

“Here, conflict is spoken before it is resolved; words must be given before solutions.” (Customary leader, May 2025)

Customary speech functions as a living form of mediation: it connects generations, lineages, and authorities. It is not reducible to discussion alone; it involves an art of rhythm, silence, and respect for symbolic hierarchies.

“We do not have powerful weapons, but we have speech. And if it is used well, it can save a village.” (Traditional chief, Tillabéri, May 2025).

Customary authority and local legitimacy

Customary authority emerges as a transversal pillar. Traditional chiefs appear at the same time as mediators, guarantors of a local social order, and symbolic figures rooted in history. Yet their role is weakened by the growing politicisation of chieftaincies – through clientelist and electoral logics – and competition with state and international mechanisms.

“When there is a problem, people call the village chief because they know he knows the families and can speak with everyone. But today we see administrative authorities wanting to decide without him, and that creates frustrations.” (Traditional chief, Tahoua, June 2025).

Chiefs often see themselves as guardians of local peace, but they lack institutional resources and feel marginalised within official programmes. Some also point to the risk of a loss of legitimacy when chiefs are perceived as being too close to political power.

Gender, generations and knowledge transmission

Women and young people emerge as mediators who are often invisible, yet essential. They intervene in domestic, community, or religious spaces, where tensions are first expressed. Women mediators are particularly attuned to the emotional and relational dimensions of conflict.

“When men talk among themselves, they forget that women often know the real causes of disputes. We intervene before things explode, but no one listens to us in the big meetings.” (Woman mediator, Dosso, May 2025)

“People think we are standing behind, but we are in front – right where anger sparks.” (Woman mediator, Tahoua, June 2025).

These words, murmured almost in fear, reveal an invisible yet vital form of mediation. They open up another reading: that of a peace woven into everyday life and discreet gestures.

Young people, for their part, oscillate between frustration and engagement. They are both the first to be exposed to the effects of the crisis and the bearers of local initiatives. Yet they denounce their marginalisation within decision-making spaces and traditional structures.

Intergenerational transmission of knowledge remains a major challenge. Several young respondents expressed their concern that customary forms of knowledge are disappearing due to a lack of recognition and valorisation.

“The elders know how to speak, listen, and calm tensions. We were not taught that at school. They need to show us before it is too late.” (Social sciences student, Niamey, June 2025).

Memories of conflict and historical continuities

Local memories – of Tuareg rebellions, intercommunal violence, recent displacements – strongly shape perceptions of legitimacy and expectations towards mediation. Some actors emphasise the weight of unresolved traumas and the tendency of international interventions to ignore such legacies.

“NGOs come to speak of peace, but they do not know the wounds we have carried since the rebellions. Until this history is acknowledged, resentment will remain. [...] Wounds do not vanish, but if we share them, maybe our children will avoid the same mistakes.” (Former rebel leader, Agadez, June 2025).

Local mechanisms and interfaces with the state

Local mechanisms – collective *palavers*⁵, recourse to elders, ritual oaths – remain widely used. Yet their effectiveness is often compromised by the lack of clear articulation with administrative and judicial institutions. Actors describe a “double logic”: customary regulation – rapid and rooted – versus formal law – slow and perceived as distant.

“When we go to court, we don’t understand their papers. It’s expensive and takes time. But if the elders settle it, it is accepted immediately.”
(Farmer/leader, Tillabéri, May 2025).

This duality creates grey zones in which populations choose the channel that is most accessible or perceived as most legitimate, depending on the situation. Some mediators suggest that better institutional recognition of customary mediation could strengthen conflict prevention.

“If we worked together—chiefs, mayors, and judges—many conflicts would be resolved before escalating into violence.” (Community mediator, Dosso, June 2025).



VISIT TO GAMOUNAN VILLAGE © ANTJE HERRBERG
2025

5 The blind spots of international approaches – and supporting indigenous methods

Niger has long been a privileged space for international intervention, through e.g. military missions, development programmes and INGOs. This presence has shaped security and humanitarian governance but also produced dynamics of dependency and mistrust. Many respondents underline that international visibility is everywhere – in projects and in mediation processes alike.

A salient point is recurrent criticism of international interventions that map linear models of governance or peace onto realities that do not correspond. Yet in Niger and across the Sahel, authority is organised not as a clear hierarchy but as a fluid heterarchy where multiple poles of legitimacy coexist: customary chiefs, religious figures, elected officials, notables, associations, youth leaders, former rebels or state representatives. No single actor monopolises decision-making. Balance is forged in interfaces – spaces where legitimacies intersect and are negotiated.

Nevertheless, most international actors still search for a single authority (e.g. a chief, a president, an official structure) to lead dialogue. This linear approach fails to grasp local dynamics. Here, peace is built in the interstices: persuading several actors at once, continuously adjusting alliances, and balancing competing powers.

The international community appears in nearly every conversation – sometimes in the background, sometimes centre-stage. It is seen as indispensable yet often misunderstood. These misunderstandings feed tension: local voices feel ignored while external actors persist in applying linear schemas.

“Foreigners always come with their own ideas. They want to help, but sometimes they impose things that do not match our reality. We see them in the villages, and after a few months, everything disappears.” (Participant from Tahoua).

My research and interviews reveal a deep tension linked to colonial legacies and repeated international interventions. Many local actors perceive these initiatives as disconnected from sociocultural realities and generative of misunderstandings.

“Our interventions are designed to support local dynamics, but we often observe that external partners do not give sufficient space to listening to endogenous conflict-resolution practices. One cannot simply import models; it is necessary to engage in dialogue with those who live these realities on a daily basis.” (Representative of Fondation Hirondelle, Community Radio).

“The colonial state always wanted to sideline the chiefs. Today, international NGOs repeat the same mistake, forgetting that without customary authorities, nothing works.” (Traditional chief).

Local voices reflect diverse opinions: some welcome the resources and visibility external actors bring; others denounce a lack of understanding of

local social dynamics. This ambivalence testifies to a fracture between the intentions of international partners and the perception of their actions.

“We need support, yes – but not imported models. Peace here must be negotiated according to our traditions, not only according to programmes written in Brussels or New York.” (Local mediator).

These perceptions converge into cross-cutting themes. The international community remains unavoidable but is often perceived as external to local logics.

This reinforces the need for approaches grounded in listening, recognition of customary authority, and integration of endogenous cultural mechanisms into any conflict-resolution strategy.

Misunderstandings between local and international actors can thus be understood as a major blind spot of peace and development policies in Niger.



HONOURING BY THE SULTAN OF ZINDER, APRIL 2025 © ANTJE HERRBERG 2025

6 Conclusion

This research process has revealed that conflict resolution in Niger and across the Sahel cannot be reduced to imported models or quick agreements. Peace here does not emerge from a single locus of power, but from a living fabric of relations, stretched across chiefs and elders, women mediators, youth leaders, religious figures, associations and state actors. No one authority can claim it entirely; legitimacy is dispersed, shared and constantly rebalanced. To mediate in such a setting is not to search for one clear entry point, but to practise the art of weaving together many threads into a fabric resilient enough to endure.

This vision may sound poetic, but it is lived daily even under military rule. Authoritarian governments in the Sahel attempt to centralise power and claim exclusive authority. Yet beneath the surface, legitimacy continues to circulate – in the voices of chiefs, in the councils of women, in the gatherings of the youth. A chief in Tillabéri said: “We have no powerful weapons, but we have words. And if they are well used, they can save a village.” Even under dictatorship, mediation can be plural, and its strength lies precisely in that plurality.

International actors have often overlooked this complexity, preferring the speed of action over the slowness of listening, bureaucratic order over flexible support, deal-making over relationship-building. As a woman mediator described how disputes over land and cattle are often resolved in kitchens and courtyards long before they appear in any official process, I sense that ignoring this invisible work is to ignore peace at its roots.

For policymakers in Brussels, New York, Addis Ababa or Washington, this means shifting posture. Engagement cannot rest on the illusion of a singular authority but must recognise heterarchy as the prevailing order. This implies mapping different

sources of legitimacy, working with them simultaneously, and accepting that overlaps are not signs of confusion but conditions for resilience. The lesson is clear: formal structures do not replace customary ones; they coexist, and legitimacy rests in the balance between them.

This could hopefully also change the way international aid and peacebuilding are financed. Conventional instruments reportedly do not reach those who matter most in the moment of tension. More flexible channels already exist, but they need to be prioritised and adapted to the Sahel’s realities. The UN Peacebuilding Fund or trusted intermediary funds provide rapid, small-scale disbursements to local mediators, women’s associations and youth networks. At the same time, multi-year relational grants are essential – not the short bursts of project money that expire just as trust is beginning to be built, but sustained partnerships that allow women’s university networks or community associations to grow slowly into durable anchors of peace. National mechanisms such as the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP) can serve as conduits for such long-term support, also because there is a link to grass-roots actors. Very often, what matters is not the amount of money but the way it moves: quick when crises demand it, steady when relationships need time, and always anchored in local legitimacy rather than external visibility.

Diplomatic and development missions should fulfil their vocation as listening posts and conveners. Their greatest contribution lies not in public programming, which often fuels suspicion, but in the careful cultivation of relationships and knowledge. This means more than appointing a focal officer for civil society; it requires building long-term, not ad hoc, ties with those who are already there to listen and understand, such as researchers, NGOs and local institutes, and formally recognising them as partners in political reporting and conflict analysis. Embassies already draw on such expertise; formalising and sustaining

these links would enrich understanding while protecting discretion. In a context where overt interventions risk provoking hostility, trust-building and transparency are indispensable: embassies should make it clear that they are not bypassing state authority, but supporting societies quietly, through dialogue, observation and pragmatic cooperation with non-state actors to understand better. This is conflict prevention. In this way, presence can remain possible without visibility, and knowledge can be gathered without deepening antagonism.

And understanding must come before intervention. The work of institutes such as LASDEL and the rich insights of anthropology and sociology are not optional but indispensable. Technical indicators cannot capture the weight of silence, the significance of ritual or the depth of memory. Without insights from these disciplines, policy will continue to have blind spots. Integrating their insights into policymaking is a condition of responsible engagement, not an afterthought.

My personal insight also confirmed that peace in the Sahel cannot be built on forgetting (the other side of the invisible). The unresolved memories of rebellion, displacement and trauma are present in every dialogue I encountered. Reconciliation here is not a symbolic ceremony but a process of intergenerational recognition.



RECEPTION AT THE COURTYARD OF THE SULTAN OF ZINDER. © ANTJE HERRBERG 2025

7 Recommendations

Peace and security in the Sahel require a shift in posture. The evidence from this research shows and confirms that durable conflict management depends on relationships, local legitimacy and slow but continuous presence. International actors too often prioritise visibility, speed and procedural models that do not reflect how authority actually functions in Niger and across the Sahel. The following recommendations translate these insights into targeted guidance for donors, diplomatic actors and the research community.

- 3 Avoid creating new gatekeepers:** In order for existing insider mediators to retain their legitimacy, donors should ensure that funds do not concentrate power in a few visible individuals. Support should be distributed across a constellation of actors to maintain balance and avoid monopolisation.
- 4 Align funding with actual conflict dynamics rather than donor visibility:** Effective peace support often happens discreetly: a reconciliation meeting in a village, a quiet intervention by an elder, a women’s dialogue that prevents escalation. Funding and evaluation criteria should recognise such outcomes even when they are not public events or large-scale programmes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DONOR COMMUNITY

- 1 Shift from short-term project cycles to long-term support:** Donor support should reflect the heterarchical governance reality: chiefs, imams, women’s groups, youth networks, former rebels and local officials operate simultaneously. Long-term funding allows trust-building across these layers and prevents the creation of artificial hierarchies.
- 2 Invest in small, flexible “peace legitimacy/conflict prevention funds”:** Local mediators, women’s associations and youth leaders act at the moment tensions emerge and often before conflicts enter a formal process. Rapid-access funds, disbursed through trusted national structures such as HACP or through intermediary foundations, enable timely action where it matters.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIPLOMATIC ACTORS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

- 5 Rebuild the diplomatic function as a listening platform:** Embassies could prioritise systematic engagement with local researchers, customary authorities, women mediators and civil society actors. Appointing researchers-in-residence or field analysts in embassies or diplomatic missions could deepen contextual understanding and correct blind spots in political reporting.
- 6 Operationalise the heterarchy perspective in political analysis:** Diplomatic missions should be aware of overlapping authorities (state, customary, religious, armed groups, notables) and monitor how legitimacy circulates between them. This provides another basis for

engagement strategies in areas where no single actor holds decisive authority.

Engage with non-state and informal actors through carefully managed channels: Local communities routinely negotiate mobility, access and security with informal or armed actors such as JNIM at village level. Diplomatic actors need to build internal capacity to understand these interactions without normalising or legitimising violence. This is also essential for realistic security assessments.

- 7 Reorient crisis prevention toward relational engagement:** Relationship-building, local dialogue mapping and the cultivation of discreet networks often provide more value than public diplomacy or large-scale programmes. Diplomatic missions could invest more time in trusted local interlocutors rather than the usual event-driven and needed visibility.

communities where it originates and not only remain within academic circles. This enhances accountability and supports local peace infrastructures.

- 11 Promote collaborative research ecosystems:** Encourage partnerships between international scholars and national institutes like LASDEL, as well as with practitioners and mediators. Knowledge generated through such collaborations improves both academic practice and policymaking.
- 12 Reclaim depth in peace practice and research:** The Sahel and other world regions demand approaches that privilege realistic analysis, cultural literacy and long-term relational presence. Technical tools or off-the-shelf methods alone cannot capture how authority functions or how conflicts are resolved. Integrating deep insights from anthropology and lived experience into policymaking and mediation practice is not optional but should be a prerequisite for responsible engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEACE RESEARCHERS

- 8 Slow down research to match the rhythm of local knowledge formation:** The Sahel's conflict dynamics are shaped by memory, silence, ritual and tacit practices. Understanding them takes time, repeated engagement and methodological reflexivity.
- 9 Re-centre anthropology, sociology, theology and psychology in mediation research:** It is not international relations or political science which explains conflict dynamics; locally, the above-mentioned disciplines explain the cultural and symbolic foundations of conflict and those dimensions are often absent from political science or security studies. Yet they are indispensable for understanding how legitimacy is built and how reconciliation is imagined.
- 10 Develop a two-way flow of knowledge:** Research should be shared back in French, Hausa, Zarma and Arabic with the

ENDNOTES

¹ EUCAP Sahel ran as an EU capacity-building mission from 8 August 2012 until 30 September 2024 (see endnote 3).

² “Notables” refers to the socially respected figures – elders, influential families, religious leaders and community representatives – who hold informal authority outside formal chieftaincy structures.

³ EUCAP refers to the EU Capacity Building Mission in Niger whose overall aim was to strengthen Niger’s internal security sector and its capacities in the fight against significant security threats. EUMPM refers to the EU Military Partnership Mission, which was not operational in practice.

⁴ JNIM or Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims is an al-Qaeda coalition formed in March 2017, combining jihadist ideology with local insurgent and governance strategies.

⁵ Palavers are open-ended and community-based deliberations led by Notables or elders in which disputes are discussed publicly, responsibilities negotiated and social harmony restored. They are rooted in oral history and consensus-building and function as locally legitimate mechanisms of conflict resolution in contexts where states have limited reach or trust. See Spittler (1993).

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ANNEX 1 METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The research presented in this policy report was designed as an action-oriented, participatory and ethnographic inquiry into local cultures of conflict resolution in Niger. The aim was not only to collect data but to create a mutual space of learning, where the researcher and participants would co-construct insights. This approach goes beyond extractive methods and allows for the emergence of knowledge that is often inaccessible by conventional means.

FRAMING THE ENCOUNTER

Each conversation began with a personal introduction: who I am as the enquirer, what I have done, and why I was interested in local approaches to conflict resolution. Situating myself in this way was essential to establish transparency and build trust. Having lived and worked in Niger, as well as in other countries in Africa, I could position myself as both an insider to certain experiences and an outsider to others. This duality shaped the dialogical quality of the encounters.

STRUCTURED AND OPEN CONVERSATIONS

Two different conversation formats were pursued:

- Structured dialogues, usually with those who from the outset appeared ready to engage in a more formal exchange. These were most common in towns or

institutional settings, where participants were accustomed to organised discussions and where most of my interviews took place.

- Open conversations, more frequent in villages or informal settings, where the dialogue unfolded informally after an opening question.

Sessions typically lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The combination of formats enabled both systematic data collection and the emergence of unexpected perspectives.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Participants were asked to sign a consent form outlining how information would be used, whether quotations would remain anonymous, and how citations could later be cross-checked with them. For some, the request to sign a document met with hesitation, as it carried an unfamiliar formal weight. Once signed, however, it also lent seriousness and legitimacy to the exchange.

The contributions of those who declined to sign were still taken into account in a holistic sense but were not cited directly or included as part of the main research corpus. This allowed the research to remain ethically grounded while still valuing the perspectives that emerged in conversation.

ANALYSIS PROCESS

All conversations were conducted in French and transcribed using AI tools. The transcripts were then analysed through:

- keyword extraction supported by AI,
- close reading by the researcher,
- repeated listening to capture nuances “between the lines”.

This triangulated process allowed transversal themes to emerge while ensuring that subtle dimensions of meaning were not lost. The emerging insights were further cross-checked against existing academic literature, which served as a dependent variable, situating local knowledge within broader epistemic frameworks.

ACCESSING TACIT KNOWLEDGE

What makes this approach distinctive is its capacity to access forms of knowledge rarely articulated in conventional research. Through dialogical trust, the inquiry opened windows into a body of Islamic-imprinted esoteric knowledge, locally referred to as *‘Ilm al-Azhar*. This body of thought is transmitted not through archives or historical records but through lived conversations, relational exchanges and cultural codes.

Gaining access to this knowledge requires more than persistence. Researchers need to be introduced through trusted intermediaries, enjoy a degree of empowerment or mandate, and build confidence step by step. The process often unfolds through a snowball effect, where multiple references and

conversations gradually unlock deeper layers of knowledge.

The researcher’s role, however, is not simply to “enjoy” privileged access to esoteric insights. It carries a responsibility to translate and transmit this knowledge in a way which benefits all actors involved, bridging between local worldviews and broader scholarly or policy debates.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The methodological distinctiveness of this policy report resonates with Karl-Heinz Kohl’s reflection in his book *Ethnologie – die Wissenschaft vom kulturell Fremden* (“Ethnology – the Science of Cultural Otherness”). Kohl argues that the epistemological strength of ethnology lies in its systematic, theory-guided confrontation with the Other, a confrontation that not only reveals foreign worlds but also reshapes the researcher’s own frame of understanding.

In this sense, the present research illustrates precisely what Kohl describes: the encounter with *‘Ilm al-Azhar* is not merely an encounter with foreign knowledge but an epistemic confrontation that refracts back onto the researcher’s own categories. The act of listening and co-interpreting becomes a form of reflexive knowledge production.

BETWEEN GLOBAL AND LOCAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

This methodological positioning also resonates with current debates in Africanist anthropology and conflict research. In *Travelling Models in African Conflict Management* (2014), Andrea Behrends, Sung-Joon Park and Richard Rottenburg propose a

framework for understanding how global models of governance and conflict management “travel” into African contexts. Their focus is on the processes of translation and re-ordering that occur when externally developed frameworks are embedded in local settings.

By contrast, scholars such as Georg Klute emphasise the reverse movement: building theory upwards from grounded ethnographic research into local practices of conflict regulation.

The Blind Spot approach offered here positions itself in between these poles. It begins with local dialogical encounters, attentive to their cultural and theological depth, but it continuously cross-checks emerging insights against existing global literatures and comparative frameworks. In this way, it avoids both the risk of imposing universalist templates and the risk of collapsing into purely local particularities. Instead, it cultivates a reflexive back-and-forth movement between local knowledge and global debates, allowing each to question and enrich the other.

CONCLUSION






In summary, this research methodology is distinctive in the context of social science insofar as it combines structured rigour with dialogical openness, technical tools with human listening, and ethical safeguards with relational trust. Its contribution lies not in producing large-scale generalisations, but in uncovering hidden epistemologies and in allowing the theological and philosophical underpinnings of conflict resolution practices to emerge.

Thus the strength of my approach lies in its ability to navigate between foreignness and familiarity, global models and local practices. In this sense, this report does not merely document but enacts a process of mutual reflection – here a small but significant instance of “knowledge in-between”.

The research is proactively shared with the study participants.

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