Republic of Niger

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Niger (officially Republic of Niger) is the largest country in West Africa in terms of size, covering 1,267,000 square kilometers, and one of the poorest in the region. It is surrounded by Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Tchad, Libya, Mali, and Nigeria, with an estimated population of more than 22 million inhabitants. By June 30, 2018, Niger Region (formerly Niger Mission Station, but renamed in 2017), established in 1986, had two Seventh-day Adventist churches,
Background

More than half of the population belong to the Hausa ethnic group, whose language, also spoken in Nigeria, is one of the most important in Western Africa. The second largest group is Zarma Songhai, living in the western part of the country. Songhai is the second most important language. Other languages spoken in Niger are Fula, Tamashek, Kanuri, and Arabic. French, however, remains the official language, although it is understood only by a small minority. The country is predominantly Islamic, as 90 percent of the citizens are Muslims, mainly Sunni Muslims, while the remaining ten percent are Christians or adherents of indigenous religions (animists). It is worth noting that 80 percent of the land in Niger is part of the Sahara Desert. The climate is mainly scorching and dry. Sedentary farmers form the majority of the population in Niger but, as usual, the lack of rainfall makes that activity very difficult.

The history of Niger can be traced back as early as 4000 B.C. when the country was a forest and ancient communities of hunters inhabited the area. As the Sahara Desert started in 2500 BC, people moved to the southern part, forming powerful kingdoms. These people are known for growing crops and being actively involved in gold, salt, and slave trade business. The Kanem-Bornou Empire, the most significant and well-known empire, ruled the region at that time. The region was conquered and ruled by the Islamic Songhai kingdom of Mali until the end of the 19th century. Hausa people coming from Nigeria occupied the southern part of the land during the 17th century. At the end of the 19th century, the French occupied the country and made it their colony in 1922.

Niger became a republic on December 18, 1958. Later, on August 3, 1960, the country became independent, with French as the official language and Niamey as the capital city. The first president after independence was Diori Hamani who ruled the country for 15 years before he was removed following a military coup d'état. He was succeeded by Seyni Kounché as president on April 15, 1974. Following the death of Seyni Kounché on November 10, 1987, Ali Chaibou, another military man, became the new president. At his time Niger began a move towards a democratically elected government.

The Beginning of Adventist Work

For a lengthy period of time, Adventist presence was almost unknown in the country. However, God in His infinite mercy revealed Himself through Adventist World Radio to a young man named Zakari Kassoule, an indigene of Niger Republic and the author of this article. He heard the Good News and started keeping Sabbath holy before, a few months later, coming into contact with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) which began to operate in the country in 1987. Therefore, the history of Adventist presence in Niger revolves around the life story of this young man, Kassoule Zakari. There are two starting points concerning his conversion to Adventism. First from Islam to the Baptist Church, and second from the Baptist Church to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Zakari was born into a large and robust Muslim family in Niger. His parents educated him in Islamic ways. He started learning about Islam and the Qur'an (Muslim holy book) at an early age. He was taught to believe in only one God, Allah, and Muhammad, his messenger. The main focal points of that religion are salvation by works, God has no son, and no one is equal to Him in power and glory, as it is written in the Qur'an (112:1-4). In fact, Kassoule decided to have nothing to do with Christianity for years.

He hated the Bible because several points he had been taught about the Bible kept coming to his mind. Two of the points were that Christians changed the Holy Scripture every year and that Muhammad was the last prophet sent by God to correct that corrupted religion, Christianity. What dominated his mind were those passages that Muslims quote to show that the Bible is full of mistakes, or to show some verses that predicted Muhammad as the messenger of God. Trained by an expert in the rules of debate and discussion, he collected many of these controversial verses to support his defense of Islam.

He tried with all his strength to destroy Christianity around him, showing that Islam was the right way as it is written in the Qur'an: (3:19): “The religion before Allah is Islam.” Since he had studied the Qur'an for years, he did not want to hear anything about the Bible. His lack of biblical knowledge was challenged one day when he and his friends met some Christians for a religious debate. It was not surprising that Kassoule was chosen by his group to prove that the Bible was not the word of God. At the end of his speech people were left unconvinced.

Following the debate, at the beginning of January 1985, he decided to read the Bible, not to become a Christian, but to better understand its errors so as to argue more convincingly and efficiently in future debates.
Some days after this debate, he met a Baptist missionary nurse from the United States, an old woman from whom he received a copy of the gospel according to John, and he started reading it to better understand the errors therein. He also received a New Testament Bible from a Muslim friend. He continued reading both, using the same method of underlining flaws. After three weeks of intensive study, he started questioning himself because he finally understood that there were significant points of truth coming out of the teachings of Jesus Christ. He came to realize that what Jesus taught was touching his heart and that they were the truths to obey. He became so confused that he needed more light to decide between Islam and Christianity. Since it was crucial for him to better understand what he had read so far, he went back to see the Baptist lady who given him the New Testament to learn about Jesus and His mission on earth. The lady’s explanation showed him that Jesus was the Savior of the world. Finally, Kassoule wholeheartedly accepted Christ as Savior and continued to follow Him despite much persecution.

The result of the decision to follow Jesus Christ was peace, joy, assurance of salvation, and a complete change in his life. He understood that Christianity was different from what he had read in some controversial books and what his Islamic teachers had conveyed to him about Christianity. Despite all the persecution and obstacles, Kassoule became a member of the Baptist Church in his country. It is noteworthy that at that time very few natives were members of that church. A year later he met a Catholic friend from whom he received a commentary on the book of Daniel written by a Seventh-day Adventist author. At the same time the friend showed him the frequencies of Adventist World Radio. At the time there were no known natives of Niger who were Seventh-day Adventists.

Following what he learned through the Adventist World Radio broadcasts, Zakari started sharing the message about the Sabbath with his Christian friends. He had to leave the Baptist Church because of misunderstandings with the church leaders who considered the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church wrong and tried to dissuade him from embracing them.

Kassoule did not attend church for many months until, on April 8, 1987, he received a letter from Adventist World Radio regional headquarters in Abidjan. The letter informed him that ADRA director, Beecher Lafever, an American citizen, had been sent to Niger. The news of an ADRA director sent to Niger came as a surprise to him. After following the instructions given, he met Lafever’s family who gave him more information about the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

It is interesting to note that, after discovering the Adventist family, Zakari invited some of his Muslim friends to join them to study the Bible. Among them were Alzouma Boundia, one of his friends in the Baptist church; his elder brother’s friend Mahammadou Abdoulaye who was a judge at that time and his wife Hadiza; and one of his cousins and classmates at secondary school, Sani Ali. These people also invited friends and relatives and the group started growing.

In August 1987 a literature evangelist named Paul Kagone from Burkina Faso and his family arrived in Niger to take care of the new group. The new believers rented a place to worship for the church activities in Niamey. Then Zakari left Niger for Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, to receive training as a literature evangelist. At the close of the training, he refused to go back to Niamey to join his friends because of persecution. In Abidjan, Zakari visited the headquarters of the division where he made many friends among the workers. It was from Abidjan that he heard about the first baptism in Niamey of nine persons on June 11, 1988. From Abidjan he received an admission letter to study theology at the Adventist University of Central Africa in Rwanda. He had left the secular university in his country after his conversion to Christianity, and now his prayer was answered because he felt called to serve God as a pastor.

While at the university doing research, Zakari found an article in the university library where, in October 1972, Edwin Ludescher, president of Equatorian African Union Mission, Maurice Zehnacker, president of East Cameroon Mission, and H. Kempf, missionary in Haute-Volta (actual Burkina Faso) came to Niger to visit the president of the Niger Republic, Diori Hamani. The reason for their visit at that time was to request the president to grant them permission to build a medical center in Niger.

Shortly after, president Hamani was removed from office. So Zakari looked for the address of Ludescher and wrote to him to get more information about that visit. Ludescher informed him that the removal of president Hamani Diorihim on April 15, 1974, caused them to not succeed in building the medical center. This being the case, one can conclude that the first official attempt to reach Niger with the Seventh-day Adventist message was in October 1972.

In Rwanda, Zakari, heard through the letters of his friends in Niamey that there were a lot of conflicts in the young church. The leaders faced many new challenges, one of them being maintaining unity among themselves and also among some new converts.

Finally, the church received a letter from the Ministry of Religious Affairs ordering them to stop operating in the country because of the disorder inside. Many members left the church because of that unfortunate situation. The leaders Beecher Lafever and Paul Kagone went back to their respective countries. On July 23, 1990, a new mission president from Italy, Riccardo Orsuci, was sent to Niger to take care of the remnant. Some months later Zakari graduated and returned to Niger in September 1991 to join the new president in leading the remaining flock of God. The leaders faced some new challenges, but they finally received authorization from the government of Niger to operate as a church. The church was restarted with zeal and determination. Riccardo and Kassoule tried first of all to gather the scattered members. Then they came together to map out a plan to meet the physical and spiritual needs of the people.
A small school was started with 35 refugees from the Republic of Mali. One of the church members, Sani Alio, became the first teacher. The next year the school, supported by ADRA and Reach Italia (an NGO), moved to a new location. At this new location, the school grew as it established an academic reputation and attracted even Muslim students. The church employed new converts as teachers, and they prepared the students both academically and spiritually.

Two members were sent to school for additional training to enable them to provide support to the future mission station. Symphorien Capochichi would study accounting, and Assoumane Mahamidou would study nursing.

In addition to the strong missionary vision of Orsuci, several elements have contributed to the stable growth of the Adventist mission in Niger. These include the publishing work, the Five-Day Plan to stop smoking, and teaching people proper nutrition. It is encouraging to see that the languishing church has been restored again by the power of the living God and through new leadership.

During the year 1994, the house rented for use by the church was bought with the contribution of Global Mission, and it became the property of the mission station. In 1995 ADRA received a second piece of land on which to build another school.

Orsuci and Zakari gave their entire lives to the mission despite many challenges in this Muslim country.

On February 24, 1995, Riccardo Orsuci left the country after an evangelistic effort in which the preacher, Pastor Elie Weick-Dido, was alleged to have spoken against Islam. For that reason, the Muslims wanted to kill Orsuci and the preacher. Specifically, it was lesson 29 in the Revelation Seminar series that was offensive to the Muslims. With Riccardo Orsuci gone, Zakari had to continue the work alone before another Italian, David Ferraro, came to join him.

Ferraro built a second school and continued to maintain peace among members before he left Niger to serve the neighboring country of Mali in the year 2000. That same year Zakari was ordained as a pastor. During the time of Ferraro, global mission pioneers brought the gospel from Niamey, the country’s capital to Dosso, 150 kilometers away from Niamey, and to Doutchi which is 300 kilometers from Niamey.

When David Ferraro left Niger, a Brazilian, Dio Cruz, came as mission president to continue the work. At that time the headquarters and a big church building were built to replace the former mission building. Two church members were sent to the university for pastoral training.

The church started to reach other cities in Niger, such as Tillabery, Oualam, and Filingue Tera, with more than 200 members. Global mission pioneers were recruited to take care of these members and there were no more hindrances to the progress of the gospel work. In April 2006 Pastor Kassoule was called to serve at the union level and he left the country of Niger, but continued to supervise the mission station for two more years, the time it took to appoint the next leader to take care of the only organized church in February 2006. Later, the two members sent for biblical training, graduated and came back to support the mission in Niger. The first one, Assoumane Anatche, arrived in August 2009, and the second one, Bachir Tiemago, in June 2013.

In the following years the country was exceedingly blessed as the number of members and places of worship increased, and many infrastructures were developed to facilitate the progress of the gospel work.

On August 2, 2015, Brazilian Davi Tavares was appointed as mission president. He developed a medical center and, with the help of God, built eight new churches around the country. Ten pastors from other churches accepted the Seventh-day Adventist message and joined the church. Most of the church members are used as evangelists to serve outside Niamey by creating groups of believers.

Twenty volunteers from Brazil came to Niger to better improve the mission work. The two local members sent to theological training graduated and came back home. The new team composed of pastors and volunteers worked so hard that the gospel reached Maradi, Makalondi, Kollo, Madaoua, and other towns outside Niamey the capital city; and cities like Dosso, Tillabery, Doutchi, for a long time neglected, were entered with the gospel.

**SOURCES**


NOTES

8. Author’s personal knowledge as the first convert to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Niger.?
9. Ibid.?
10. Ibid.?
11. Ibid.?
12. Ibid.?
13. Ibid.?
14. Ibid.?
17. Personal knowledge of the author as the first convert to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Niger.?
18. That portion was written base on the report that Riccardo Orsuci sent to Kassoule Zakari on March 1995, after his departure from Niger. It’s a copy of his report sent to the Sahel Union. In that report he stated what he had done during the 55 months he was in Niger. As they worked together, Zakari added some missing elements to the report.?
19. Personal knowledge of the author as the first convert to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Niger.?
20. Ibid.?
21. Ibid.?
22. Ibid.?