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Mali: The stoning that didn't happen, and why it matters

BY FERDAOUS BOUHLEL, YVAN GUICHAOUA & JEAN-HERVÉ JÉZÉQUEL ([HTTPS://AFRICANARGUMENTS.ORG/AUTHOR/FERDAOUS-BOUHLEL-AND-YVAN-GUICHAOUA-AND-JEAN-HERVE/](https://africanarguments.org/author/ferdaous-bouhlel-and-yvan-guichoua-and-jean-herve/)) / 🕒 JUNE 21, 2017 / 💬 0

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Most media accounts depict an unequivocal reign of terror under Islamist rule in northern Mali. That's inaccurate in some important ways.




Maliens in the north pray outside in Timbuktu. Credit: United Nations Photo.

On 17 May, AFP reported (<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/societe/20170517.AFP3463/mali-un-couple-lapide-pour-concubinage-par-des-islamistes.html>) that an unmarried couple had been stoned to death by Islamists near Aguelhoc in northern Mali (<https://africanarguments.org/category/country/west/mali/>). Details were provided: between “11 and 21 persons” had attended the stoning which was filmed; there were four executioners; “everybody was calm”. The next day, RFI confirmed (<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170517-mali-couple-lapide-mort-tahglit-ag-ghaly>) the events.

Both of the news pieces relied on testimonies of “notables” and “elected officials” from the region, where Islamist militancy remains intense despite a substantial foreign military presence. The story gained global attention and was covered by major media outlets including Le Monde and The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/17/unmarried-couple-stoned-to-death-mali-islamic-law>).

However, local journalists (https://twitter.com/ag_anara/status/865183848782602240) and others on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/SahelSandNews/status/865183448927006721>) soon raised concerns about its veracity. They confirmed that a young woman accused of having a relationship out of wedlock was kidnapped by armed men on 16 May, but could not ascertain what happened next. As researchers working on the region for several years, we also mobilised our network of well-informed friends and contact: could not get confirmation of a stoning.

The story of execution had been plausible since a similar event happened  English ↑ (<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20120731.OBS8489/mali-un-couple-non-marie-lapide-a-anguelhoc.html>) in 2012. But this time it turned out to be wrong. A week after the original AFP wire, rumours spread that the young woman had in fact been released and sent home. Jama'ah Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the dominant jihadi movement in the region, denied (<https://twitter.com/rmaghrebi/status/868096149579857921>) any stoning had taken place and warned (<https://twitter.com/YGuichaoua/status/868120703471685633>) the media against the fabrication of fake news.

Finally, on 29 May, AFP withdrew its original report, saying that a sentence of stoning had been pronounced but not executed. RFI revised (<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170529-mali-lapidation-dementi-couple-aguelhoc-tessalit>) its claim soon after too.

This unfortunate diffusion of false news may seem like one more minor case of news organisations failing to check their facts. But it actually tells us a lot about how news in northern Mali is produced and invites reflection.


Seeking the truth in northern Mali

The episode stresses how complicated it is to gather information about northern Mali. AFP and RFI work from Bamako and Paris, respectively 1,500 km and 4,500 km away from the town of Kidal, where the reported events unfolded. Researchers operate from similar distances for the same security reasons.

The consequence of this is that journalists and researchers rely on indirect sources of information that are far from perfect and then do their best to triangulate them. It can often be difficult to tell whether two accounts are distinct or if they derive from the same source of information, since the same story can circulate through networks under multiple guises.

These constraints on access to information demand extreme prudence. This was severely lacking in AFP and RFI's reporting. They took the word of "notables" and "elected officials" for granted and ignored more sceptical voices.

This is particularly problematic in northern Mali given that the region is replete with communal feuds. There is much antagonism, for example, between members of the Imghad community who are part of an armed pro-government coalition, and members of the Ifoghas tribe to which JNIM leader Iyad Ag Gh belongs.

The timing of the stoning story is also important. It came as some civil society  and politicians were calling for negotiations (<https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2017/05/26/on-malis-internal-debates-about-negotiating-with-jihadists/>) with Islamist leaders – calls that were abruptly rejected by authorities. It also immediately preceded French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Mali in which he met with French troops and re-affirmed France's pledge to fight terrorism.

[*Macron and the Maghreb* (<https://africanarguments.org/2017/06/01/macron-and-the-maghreb/>)]

In this context, it is to be expected that contacts on the ground may be biased. The only way to overcome this is to ensure sources of information come from different parts of the political spectrum.


Behind the media narratives

The false stoning episode doesn't just reveal the practical difficulties of wartime reporting. It also exemplifies how aspects of everyday life in zones of Mali where jihadi movements operate are systematically overlooked. The mishandling of the story illustrates a broader trend of Western, but also African, mainstream media misrepresenting the complex relationship between the radical groups and local populations.

Most media accounts depict an unequivocal reign of terror under Islamist rule in northern Mali. But field interviews reveal a more ambiguous situation in which egregious violence by radical groups coexists with a non-violent governance agenda and willingness to deliver services.

In central Mali, jihadi movements forcibly gather local population to preach. They also regularly assassinate those perceived to be collaborating with state officials and foreign armed forces. But at the same time, these groups provide mobile justice courts in places where judges have long been absent. They advocate for the suppression of land rights that benefit a tiny and contested aristocracy. They offer much-needed protection to cattle herders during seasonal migrations. And the simplified marriage procedures they impose allow youths to escape elder's control over marital engagements.

This is not to deny appalling violence against civilians, especially women. Although the vast majority of people killed by jihadi groups are men, gender violence – including abduction and forced marriage in places like Gao in 2012 – should not be underestimated.

It is important to note though, that women have sometimes resisted. In Kidal,  for instance, women protested against the decision of Iyad Ag Ghaly's former group, Ansar Eddine, to impose strict rules on their travel. Here again, the relationship between Sahelian women and jihadi movements is not fully encapsulated in a singular narrative of domination and violence.

In the Lake Chad area, several organisations – including The International Crisis Group (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/nigeria-women-and-boko-haram-insurgency>) – have documented that a significant number of young Kanuri women have voluntarily joined Boko Haram in order to find a suitable husband or benefit from new economic opportunities. For some women living in particularly impoverished rural areas, joining the jihadi insurgency may be more attractive, at least to start, than their daily routine in the strict patriarchy of rural villages.


Crimes and punishments

When we asked local friends and contacts about the kidnapped woman, their narratives did not indulge in the emotional, outraged narratives seen in the media. Instead, they mostly pondered the rationale of the kidnappers and the risks the woman was incurring within legal Islamic parameters.

Although many versions of the story circulated, all had two elements in common: first, the woman's husband was detained in Algeria for some criminal offence; second, she had a baby from her lover. The main questions on our sources' minds were: Was the woman *de jure* or *de facto* divorced from her detained husband? Was she still breastfeeding her baby?

These questions, among others, matter for an eventual sentence to be pronounced by an Islamic judge in an alleged adultery case. Whether to inflict physical punishment on the woman was framed as a legal discussion, not as the unilateral whim of blood-thirsty sociopaths.

The above legal questions relate to broader discussions regarding punishments under Shariah Law – specifically those which are mandated and fixed by God and are applicable in cases of fornication, apostasy etc. Questions over these penalties (known as *had*, plural *hudud*) were debated at length in 2012 when allied Islamist movements occupied Mali's three main northern regions: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Timbuktu; the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in Gao; and Ansar Eddine in Kidal.

At that time, judiciary decisions were delegated to local Islamic judges (*cadis*).  English there were many differences in the application of *hudud* across these three regions. For instance, there were multiple cases of amputations for robbery in Timbuktu and Gao. But in Kidal, Ansar Eddine agreed with local Islamic judges that sentences would be maintained in line with local customs that historically prefer detention over physical punishment.

Despite this, a stoning did occur in Aguelhoc in 2012. Why this happened requires more research. According to a good number of testimonies gathered locally (including among people politically opposed to Iyad Ag Ghaly), the stoning was decided by a Mauritanian *cadi* without Iyad Ag Ghaly knowing about it. The same sources say that Iyad Ag Ghaly later disapproved the stoning. It is unclear who the *cadi* recognised as his legitimate leader, as northern Mali was then under the influence of different Emirs.

Such complexities and variations between regions supposedly governed by the same Shariah provisions demands additional investigation. Why would *hudud*, a pillar of political and social legitimation across jihadi movements, be suspended in some places but not others? Is it to do with the organisational structure of the armed groups, the population's agency, or something else? Either way, the jihadi occupation of 2012 proved to be large-scale social experiment, which generated intense debate over the codified use of violence as a governing instrument.


Easy narratives vs. difficult thinking

The media's portrayal of jihadi groups' horrific rule in the Sahel is a double-edge sword in the fight against these armed movements. On the one hand, their typical coverage provides a classic and possibly efficient form of war propaganda, which calls for unity against the common enemy.

But on the other hand, the depiction of Islamist presence and political influence as unequivocally oppressive misses some critical points: namely, the jihadis' interest in managing their use of coercion rather than just unleashing it; and their ambition to govern aspects of life through both violent and non-violent ways, sometimes in accordance with local customs.

Obscuring the governance project promoted by Islamists fails to account for why an increasing number of Sahelians, especially among the youth, are ready to support and sometimes join these groups in a context where official authorities are performing appallingly.

One-dimensional narratives serve warlike projects well. The search for political solutions requires more complex thinking.

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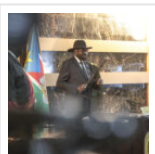
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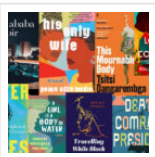


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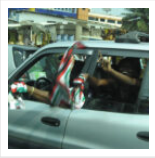
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