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The Politics of Difference and Women's Associations in Niger: Of "Prostitutes," the Public, and Politics

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Introduction

In this article I will trace out two related phenomena—the development of women's associations in Niger and the categorization and characterization of "married" and "unmarried" women in the Maradi region of Niger from the late 1950s to the late 1980s. The dual development of women's associations and reconceptualizations of women's status within or outside of marriage occurred at the intersection of national influences and interests with local circumstances and cultural categories. Beginning with the creation of the Union des Femmes du Niger in 1958 and progressing through the emergence of the Association des Femmes du Niger and the Samaria youth association in the mid 1970s, I argue that women's associations in Maradi have not served to crystallize a Hausa female subculture of the kind in Katsina, described by Renée Pittin, into a politically unified social grouping (1979, 21). Instead, women in this Hausa-speaking region of the Sahel have used the different women's associations to emphasize age, marital, and status distinctions among themselves as part of a larger movement to create a legitimate public persona for both married and unmarried women.

This work is based on oral and archival research in France and Niger in 1988–89 funded through a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Research Abroad Fellowship. Versions of this work were presented at the African Studies Association meetings in Baltimore in 1990 and in Toronto in 1994. Thanks to Sara Berry, Jim McCann, Ann Dunbar, Donald Moore, Richard Miller, and Deb Amory for helpful conversations and comments. Thanks also to the Signs editors and readers whose incisive remarks have prompted me to rework my argument considerably. All remaining flaws are, of course, my own responsibility. This work could not have been done without the friendship and cooperation of many AFN women in Maradi, whose own reading of feminism and politics in Niger's women's associations may differ substantially from mine but to whom I nevertheless am deeply indebted: ina matu'kar godiya ga 'kunijyar mata ta Maradi; Allah ya ba ku nasara.
Women thus participate in social transformation not by appeal to female solidarity or to a shared female culture but by drawing subversively upon existing social forms to generate new possibilities for women in a changing political economy.

I refer to this extremely contradictory tactic as the "politics of difference," for it is only by underscoring differences among women that it has been possible for women in this sexually segregated setting to redefine marriage, respectable behavior, and access to external political spaces.¹ The danger of such a maneuver is, of course, that in emphasizing difference and in drawing upon existing categories and social forms to generate new social and political possibilities, there is a risk of heightening tensions among women and reinforcing accepted gender ideologies. Let me hasten to add that I am not arguing that women as a whole have consciously and deliberately engineered this tactic. To the contrary, I am suggesting that women's associations in Maradi in the late 1980s reflected fissures within the female body politic; in the pragmatics of bringing themselves into visibility and out of silence in this comparatively conservative Muslim region, women drew upon and emphasized those fissures. I characterize the politics of difference as tactical not so much because it reflects the ongoing working out of a conscious strategy but because it seems important to me to see feminist movements as frequently provisional and processual, as working in uneven and contradictory fashion toward ends that may not be fully articulated and that cannot always be achieved through direct and confrontational means. Research on women in the Muslim world is beginning to reveal the complexity of feminism in such settings: women may choose to adopt a purely secular feminism, or they may attempt to work from within Islam to promote interpretations of the Koran that are more favorable to women, or they may call upon aspects of local understandings of Islam that they find liberating (such as veiling, education, and female companionship).²

It would be a serious mistake, I believe, to see feminisms that simultaneously draw upon and transform existing ideologies and social forms as merely exhibiting false consciousness. The challenge for Western-trained feminist scholars and researchers is to begin to learn how to listen, not only to one another but also, more important, to women whose feminism is not enunciated in theoretical language or in familiar forms. Indeed, women engaged in feminist movement outside the purview of Western institutions may not even regard Western feminists,

¹ This study is part of a larger project exploring gender, space, and social position. For an extended discussion of how to move beyond the confines of the domestic/public dichotomy in analyzing women's negotiation of space and their means of entry into "external" public spaces, see Cooper 1994.
² For a survey of recent work, see Moghadam 1991.
whatever their persuasion, as relevant interlocutors. Such feminisms may be couched in idioms that are not readily recognizable to feminists in the West, eluding characterization within the divides of cultural feminist solidarity, radical feminist gender abolition, pragmatic feminist equal-rights activism, or self-consciously constructed postmodern coalitional politics. Women in Maradi share with women in feminist struggle elsewhere the necessity of living and working with what Ann Snitow has referred to as the “recurring feminist divide”: “In feminist discourse a tension keeps forming between finding a useful lever in female identity and seeing that identity as hopelessly compromised” (1990, 17). Maradi women draw upon their common position as women while simultaneously calling into question the unity and stability of the category “woman.” They have played subversively upon the local category “married woman” in order to make possible greater female public visibility, but their invocation of that category inevitably reinscribes local norms that stigmatize female sexuality outside of marriage.

This article derives from my reflections upon the stresses and torn loyalties I experienced in conducting research for a social history of the Maradi region of Niger grounded in questions about women’s experiences and female agency. My research was not focused on formal political associations; in fact, I devoted much of my time in the field to attempting to make sense of how women have participated in a rapidly changing economy over the course of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, because of the particular manner in which I was integrated into the social scene of Maradi, I found myself pondering the nature of women’s associations there. In 1988 when I first arrived in the city of Maradi (population ca. 80,000), the capital of this largely agricultural region on the Niger-Nigeria border, local authorities at the Mairie determined that I should make my contacts with women through the Association des Femmes du Niger (AFN), the women’s wing of the political party in power at the time. These male bureaucrats reasoned that men would be less likely to object to my interactions with their wives (some of whom were in seclusion) if it were clear that my research had been vetted through the appropriate state-controlled channels.

I was therefore introduced to the women who headed the various neighborhood subunits of the AFN, and these women then arranged for me to meet other women in their circle of friends, kin, and neighbors. I eventually managed to work with many women who were not members of the AFN, and who indeed knew little or nothing about it, by branching out from this initial field of women. However, because I had made my earliest contacts through the women’s association, AFN members took me under their collective wing, and I became something of a mascot for them whenever the AFN took part in highly visible public events. In a
sense, if they were "my" informants, I was "their" researcher, and my public association with the AFN must have served them in some important way, given their insistence on my presence at these events. What was at stake here, I wondered? Why was it so important that I stand together with these women at parades and spectacles?

My puzzlement deepened the better I got to know some of the most active members of the women's association and as I became more alert to their ambivalence about the time-consuming activities of the AFN and to their hostility toward other groupings of women in the city, particularly toward the young unmarried women who were members of the Samaria youth organization. While the female members of the AFN and the Samaria were both active at political rallies, they kept quite distant from one another both socially and physically. This antagonism became most pronounced when I had to choose my loyalties in a highly public and visible arena: Would I use my car to transport key members of the AFN to and from a political rally, or would I carry some of the young women I worked with who were prominent members of the Samaria? In one such moment a prominent AFN member remarked to me with contempt that I would get no good "history" from the women in the Samaria. Having discovered fairly early on in my research that if I wanted to gain the trust of women, I would have to forgo my original plan to work with both men and women, I was somewhat taken aback to discover that I might then have to choose to ally myself with only one group of women. In the end it was possible to remain publicly associated with the AFN while working quietly with some Samaria women. Nevertheless, such moments made it quite clear to me that any cultural feminist vision of a unified female sphere in Maradi would not come close to describing the complex relations among women of differing age, marital status, and occupation and would in fact obscure some of the most important ways in which women in Maradi constitute themselves in formal political arenas.

This article represents my own attempt to understand the contradictions I encountered while working with these women. In part it is a working out of my own sense of disappointment that the kind of female solidarity so often lauded in research on women and in particular in research on women in Africa failed so dramatically to materialize in my own experience. But it is also an effort to take seriously the situatedness of feminist movement in Maradi: What can a Western-educated feminist know about what feminist politics should look like for women who encounter a quite different range of opportunities and constraints from those the researcher encounters? I was moved to take the activities and social maneuvering of AFN members seriously as "political" because I knew from my observations and extensive interviews with many of them that these were canny, resilient, and perceptive women. After I overcame...
my initial disappointment with the seemingly petty divisions within the female body politic in Maradi, I began to think more carefully about what larger end these divisions might serve. I began to call upon spatial, linguistic, and performance analysis to think beyond a reified female culture toward something that is far more changeable and provisional, something that draws upon existing ideologies even as it transforms them through unexpected juxtapositions and alliances.

In this study I will explore a performative and linguistic moment in which women in Maradi have played upon the dominant ideology of female respectability in marriage in order to redefine both “respectability” and what it means to be a “married woman.” This performance takes place in the spatialized realm of the external public gatherings that constitute the most clearly recognized arena for formal politics. If I emphasize the performative and political element in this study it is because my historical work on women’s shifting roles in the economy has impressed upon me the urgency of women’s increased access to the external public spaces of larger-scale trade, formal politics, and Western education. Most women throughout the Hausa-speaking region earn income through petty trade in prepared foods or small quantities of cloth and other trade goods. Women restricted to their homes rely upon their young daughters to purchase inputs and to peddle the goods from door to door. Tempering scholars’ enthusiastic depictions of the autonomy and vitality of the Hausa female subculture and its “hidden economy,” Barbara Callaway remarks of women in Kano: “It should be emphasized . . . that there is little comparison between the wage sector and the hidden economy of women. The incomes of most women would not even support them at a subsistence level” (1987, 77). To gain access to public-sector employment, larger-scale trade, and significant education, women in this region must first fight for the right to conduct their lives openly beyond the confines of their homes.

**Unmarried women and the politics of naming**

In order to make clear what I mean when I suggest that women in Maradi have used existing social forms to create new political possibilities, it will be useful to first set out some of the verbal categories available in Hausa for identifying and characterizing women of different marital status. As will become clear in a moment, there are important historical, cultural, political, and economic variations within the Hausa-speaking region of the central Sudan, which spans both sides of the Niger-Nigeria border. Hence I will roughly describe some of the language used to describe and categorize women; the ensuing discussion should demonstrate, however, that this language is neither fixed nor uniformly deployed by all Hausa speakers.
The word used for an adult woman, mata, is also used to designate a wife, much as in French (femme) or in German (Frau) adulthood and marriage are linked in the words for “woman” and “wife.” Prior to her first marriage (generally at puberty in the Maradi region) a marriageable girl is known as a budurwa, a term that implies virginity. A married woman who loses her husband either through divorce or widowhood may be known as a bajawara, which implies that she and the male kin who serve as her guardians (with whom she may live and who support her) are interested in finding her a new husband. Finally, a previously married woman who earns her keep through sexual favors is known as a karuwa. Such a woman is likely to live in a house together with other karuwai, and her means of income is known as karuwanci. Renée Pittin’s research in Katsina (Nigeria) on the female-centered “houses of women” in which karuwai live reveals that women may enter into karuwanci temporarily, that they may marry a “client,” and that in general women treat movement into and out of marriages as career moves, with karuwanci serving simply as one “career” option among several (1979).

The long-standing institution of karuwanci presents translation difficulties for the English speaker, for although it bears some resemblance to prostitution, the relative permanence of the sexual relationships involved, the courtship those relationships entail, and the lack of enduring stigma that practitioners encounter have prompted most English-speaking researchers to employ the word “courtesanship” instead. Hausa speakers in Niger, when speaking in French, often use the term une femme-libre to describe a woman who takes part in karuwanci rather than, for example, une putin or une prostituee, suggesting that indeed Hausa speakers do not regard this practice as being entirely congruent with prostitution. In Maradi, streetwalkers who come from other ethnic groups and who do not practice the domestic courtesanship women assimilated to Hausa culture prefer are openly derided and would not be called karuwai; Hausa speakers sometimes use the French loanword passe-partout to denote such women. The variations in forms of sex work in Maradi show some clear parallels with Luise White’s work in Nairobi; karuwanci corresponds most closely with what White refers to as the Malaya form and streetwalkers from other ethnic groups follow something more like the Watembezi form (White 1990). For comparative purposes, then, one might choose to follow White’s lead and analyze karuwanci as one form of prostitution among several. In this text I shall use the word “courtesanship” to refer to karuwanci. I retain the quotation marks, however, to remind the reader that we, too, are contributing to a debate about the moral character of karuwanci, sex work, “prostitution,” and female sexuality, even in this act of translation.

This overview of linguistic categories, of course, obscures the extremely contested nature of naming. A great deal is at stake in which term
is attributed to which women and by whom. There is little ambiguity about how to name a young girl who has never been married—she is a *budurwa* (virgin). Increasingly when a girl manages to continue her schooling beyond primary school, she might not marry until she is in her late teens or early twenties. In this case her status is ambiguous: the possibility that such a young woman has been sexually active prior to her first marriage complicates the question of whether she could reasonably be considered a *budurwa*. In general, however, a girl would be unlikely to enter into “courtesanship” without first having been married at least once. It is the large number of women who have been married at least once but are no longer who present the greatest difficulty to categorization. Hausa language does not distinguish a divorcée from a widow or provide a broad term such as *single woman*. For convenience I shall refer to all such ambiguous women as “nonmarried” in order to distinguish them clearly from pubescent girls who have never been married. Pittin asserts from her work in Katsina that while men may refer to any nonmarried woman who is not kin as a *karuwa*, women are more likely to use the more neutral term *bajawara*, a word that does not imply “courtesanship.” She argues that men’s preoccupation with “courtesanship” is a denial of the female subculture’s recognition of nonmarriage as an acceptable and respectable career option. Women, she asserts, are less concerned than men are with defining other women in relation to men: “The women have little emotional, moral, or political investment in the concept of women outside their husband’s houses occupying a negative or stigmatized position” (Pittin 1979, 98). Women are more likely to use the word *bajawara* to describe another adult woman who is living outside marriage; men can imagine no option for women outside marriage other than “courtesanship.”

In Maradi in the late 1980s the situation was more complex than Pittin’s account of Katsina in the 1970s. Certainly, men in Maradi characterized some nonmarried women as “courtesans,” while women were more likely than men to characterize some nonmarried women as *bajawera*. In Maradi today, however, when women refer to another woman as a *bajawera* they mean two things: first, that she is living with relatives and is under the authority of a senior male, and, second, that she and her guardian are pursuing or anticipating her remarriage. The word *bajawera* is not any more appropriate than is the word *karuwa* to describe an unmarried woman who lives on her own, earns her own keep without recourse to sexual favors, and has no immediate interest in remarrying. *Bajawera* is a more positive term, but it is not a more accurate term. Consequently, single women in Maradi often maintain the pretense that they are interested in remarrying simply in order to be called *bajawera* rather than *karuwai*. The problem with conflating the categories of nonmarried women by promoting the notion that all nonmarried women
ought to be considered bajawara is that it categorizes women who are pursuing remarriage with women who have no immediate interest in doing so. In Maradi, women emphatically consider certain women to be karuwai with something close to the moral opprobrium attached to the English word prostitute, although the stigma is of a less lasting character. They also recognize that there are some women who are not married, who have no intention of remarrying in the near future, and whose primary source of income is not connected to sexual favors. These women are the subject of considerable debate among Maradi women themselves, for if they are not karuwai and they are not bajawara, what are they?

I will now elucidate how the naming of nonmarried women has evolved in Maradi by tracing out the development of the political associations in which women have taken part during the postindependence era. It will become clear that the two issues are related, for as women begin to carve out a political place and persona for themselves, they must also create an appropriate public image, an image that neither karuwa nor bajawara adequately captures. This exercise in naming is a political exercise.

The evolution of women’s associations in Niger

In order to make sense of the character and positioning of the primary women’s associations in Niger’s postindependence history, let me first sketch out the rise, decline, and recent resurgence of multiparty politics in Niger since 1945. With liberal reforms in politics in the French colonies following World War II, political parties were formed in the French colonial territories to send representatives to the new Constituent National Assembly in Paris. The Parti Progressiste Nigerien (PPN), which was formed in 1946 by a group of elite intellectuals from the western Zarma-speaking region of the country, emerged from a series of complex and shifting alliances and parties to gain control of the government of the newly autonomous Republic of Niger in 1958. The PPN leader Diori Hamani was named prime minister. In the following months the PPN proceeded to eliminate all opposition parties, reserving all positions for its own members. Upon Niger’s full independence in 1960, Diori absorbed all the remaining non-PPN politicians into his own party, and henceforth Niger was a one-party state.

In consolidating his control over the country, Diori gradually alienated the Hausa traditional rulers, who had continued to serve as the admin-

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3 This section is intended to present the reader unfamiliar with Nigerien politics with a bare outline of the political parties relevant to this discussion. For a more exhaustive discussion of Nigerien political history, I refer the reader to the sources I used to compile this sketch: Fuglestad 1983, 147–88; Decalo 1990, 241–84; Charlick 1991, 40–52.
The political apparatus under French rule and whose networks and power bases Diori attempted to co-opt through the creation of party committees in each village. Diori formed a national “animation” agency, which was to create a pyramid of rural organizations that would replace local governments, bypassing the power networks built up by entrenched local powers. The rural party base would be founded on the state-directed cooperatives and a state-initiated youth movement.

The Diori regime’s complacency and lack of interest in domestic problems eventually provoked a successful military coup in 1974. Many factors contributed to the coup, among them resentment of Diori’s ties to the French government, his poor handling of negotiations for partial profits from the newly developing uranium mines, his alienation of traditional rulers, and, most important, his administration’s cynical and inhumane manner of distributing relief grain from international donors during the Sahel drought of 1968–74. The military government that took power under Seyni Kountché was very popular at first. Kountché used the brief surge in revenues from uranium to raise the minimum wage, improve national education, and make rural development and agriculture the nation’s priority (Decalo 1990, 268–69). His regime also developed a series of local-level institutions to replace Diori’s village party committees with a “development society” based on the support of cooperatives, a renewed and expanded youth movement called the Samaria Youth Association, and a series of socioprofessional groups. Like Diori, Kountché hoped to mobilize popular support and channel political activity while bypassing any autonomous power bases at the local level (Charlick 1991, 64–67).

As uranium revenues declined, the Kountché regime suffered numerous coup attempts and perennial student unrest, all of which Kountché survived. When he died in late 1987 of a brain tumor, he was succeeded by his chief of staff, Ali Saibou. Saibou seemed at first to have a strong hold upon his position, dealing moderately with student strikes. Saibou moved ahead with Kountché’s plans to build a national charter and set up a committee to draft a constitution and to set dates for the elections of an assembly and president. In 1988 he launched a new party, the Mouvement National de la Société de Développement (MNSD) to facilitate the upcoming “civilian” presidential election. In spite of the décrispation (relaxing) of the Saibou regime, however, intellectuals and farmers alike were quietly skeptical of the apparent democratization under way; the MNSD was firmly in the hands of Saibou, and the military government and the new constitution would be directed, controlled, and finally overseen by the military regime, even if a civilian were elected president of the party. By January 1988 student strikes were becoming difficult to control, and Saibou began to clamp down on demonstrations by closing the
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university, expelling student leaders, and forcing students to evacuate university housing. In early 1990 the army fired on a demonstration on the Kennedy Bridge in Niamey, killing a number of students and injuring others (Charlick 1991, 75). Saibou's difficulties were compounded by escalating violence between army troops and marginalized Tuareg nomads. In May 1990 an attack on the sous-préfecture in Tchin-Tabaraden attributed to Tuareg "bandits" in which thirty-one deaths were reported was followed by damaging international news coverage of violent army reprisals against the general Tuareg population. Allegedly, hundreds of Tuaregs were arrested and tortured, and many were killed (West Africa 1990).

Popular discontent over the attacks on the Tuaregs, the shooting of students in Niamey, and austerity measures crystallized in a coalition between students and labor unions, who joined together to use strikes to pressure the Saibou regime to initiate a national conference for constitutional reform and to arrange multiparty elections. By March 1991 the Union Syndicale des Travailleurs du Niger (USTN) labor union had won an agreement from the MNSD government guaranteeing, among other things, access to the state media for opposition parties (West Africa 1991a, 524). In an effort to limit the military control over the elections the USTN forced Saibou to exclude the associations created or co-opted to form the base for the MNSD (the Samaria Youth Association, the Association of Traditional Leaders, the Islamic Association, and the Cooperatives) from the planning commission charged with arranging the national conference (West Africa 1991b, 818). The MNSD candidate was defeated in multiparty elections held early in 1993, bringing a coalition government to power under Mahamane Ousmane, a civilian Hausa statistician from Zinder.

Women's and youth associations have served as a means of mobilizing and making visible the power bases of the various political parties in Niger's postwar history. Youth associations in Niger (in contrast with the student unions) have not been formed spontaneously but were, rather, created to serve as wings of an existing political party. Youth group festivities have often served to distract from the vocal complaints of more politicized student groups and to entertain the large numbers of educated but unemployed youth. Similarly, until the civilian coup leading to the 1993 elections, there had not been an autonomous or spontaneously created women's political association in Niger. Prior associations were created as part of a political party or regime already dominated by men or were informal self-help and entertainment groupings absorbed into a political party. Women's groups could symbolize both a party's commitment to modernization and its roots in tradition. The problem that parties have faced in mobilizing women as a party base has been that the
women who have the greatest mobility and visibility within the external public sphere are precisely those nonmarried women whose character and status are most ambiguous.

Thus when the PPN attempted to adopt the "courtesans" of Maradi in the 1960s to form the nucleus of its women's wing, it encouraged a change in naming. These femmes-libres represented qualities that the party regarded as signs of a modern, worldly woman. As Jacqueline Nicolas observed at the time, the "courtesan" "embodies the woman who has succeeded in freeing herself of the family yoke and has overcome certain taboos, a woman who lives on her own and who therefore is more likely to choose for herself the husband who suits her. The 'independent woman' is used by the PPN as their Egeria—companion and advisor to the kings! It is the party which had the word 'karuwa' changed to 'zawara' " (Nicolas 1967, 59). The PPN attempted to replace the stigmatized term for "courtesan" with the neutral term for a woman between marriages (zawara, bazawara, and bajawara are variants of the same term) in order to legitimize the single women who served as the party's visible female base. However short-lived this renaming—certainly it no longer holds true today—it underscores the importance of nonmarried women to politics in a Muslim society where very few married women are in a position to join a political base publicly. Whether they were in strict seclusion or not, few respectable married women could have been called upon to parade on national holidays or to promote party propaganda. By choosing the word bajawara to replace karuwa the PPN was automatically implying that these single women were temporarily between marriages. These women were to be held up as progressive women and potential wives, not as women who had chosen a lifestyle that rejected or threatened the traditional ideal of marriage. It would have been difficult then, as it is today, for a young woman to state in any public manner that she had no interest in remarriage. Like many of my single female contacts in Maradi today, they would be far more inclined to profess an interest in marriage, "if only the right man would come along," while at the same time rejecting successive suitors.4 In part this is a strategy for finding a compatible or at least compliant husband. But it is also a strategy for avoiding criticism while maintaining an independent lifestyle.

The PPN's necessarily ambivalent relationship to "courtesanship" and independent women is made clearer in a rather Orwellian proposal made by the Union des Femmes du Niger (UFN), the party's women's

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4 This notion of holding out for a husband who suits a woman's choice of lifestyle is nicely captured in the words of one unmarried woman: "Jusqu'ici je n'ai pas trouvé un soupirant qui cadrerait avec ma vie" (I still haven't found a suitor who suits my lifestyle).
association founded in 1958 under Diori and promoted by his wife Aissa Diori: “The women of Niger demand that the party and the government give serious attention to the advancement of women at the national level. In particular the UFN calls for the creation of a female police force empowered to oversee urban morals and to prevent prostitution in cities and urban centers” (quoted in Clair 1965, 139–40). This improbable proposal is followed by a series of demands that highlight the importance of women in the family: they further demand “the schooling of Nigérien women so that they can soon bring their invaluable assistance to the education of children in the family, to the improvement of hygiene and nutrition, and to better child-raising practices and home economics. They also demand the creation of jobs specifically for women, particularly as stewardesses, waitresses, saleswomen, typists, stenographers, switchboard operators, police agents, and chauffeurs” (quoted in Clair 1965, 140).

Women’s education is proposed and justified here as a means to promote the well-being of children and to raise the standard of living for families. The dominance of the existing image of women as primarily wives and mothers meant that the UFN could only imagine laying political claim to education and jobs by publicly distancing itself from any interest in an immoral independent life outside the family. Through this juxtaposition the UFN implied that immoral sexual activities are the outcome of women’s exclusion from education and employment in the formal economy: by promoting female jobs and education, the government would then encourage women to attend to their proper duties as wives and mothers.

Having established its interest in morality and the family, the UFN then went on to make a series of social and judicial demands that have yet to be fully implemented, modest though they may seem: “The UFN demands that the government facilitate women’s entry into judicial, social, and political careers; the liberation and upholding of women as wives and mothers; and the recognition by the state and by their husbands of their right to individual property. The UFN also demands that new legislation on marriage and the marriage contract be instituted guaranteeing a woman protection from divorce [repudiation] once she has had four children” (quoted in Clair 1965, 140). The UFN’s defense of motherhood was not feigned: it was indeed interested in promoting women and in protecting the interests of women as mothers and wives.

In this juxtaposition of “courtesans” carrying the PPN banner and the cry for upholding women as wives and mothers we see the difficulties in mobilizing women politically in Niger: the women who are most available and visible as images of the modern woman at the same time threaten the accepted family organization. The renaming of karuwai as
bajawara was in part an attempt to minimize the threat of these independent women.

It was the UFN that founded the original women's association in Maradi under the direction of Umma Aguiyar, a well-educated midwife from the Zarma-speaking region near the capital. Soon after the Maradi branch was formed, the internal divisions that have characterized the women's associations there began to emerge. While Madame Aguiyar acted as the president, the woman who was chosen as her vice president was Aisha Wandara, the sister of the traditional Hausa ruler of Maradi. Wandara had briefly held the title Iya, giving her authority over the members of the bori spirit possession cult when her brother was first enthroned. Her relative youth and independence, however, got her into trouble, and she was replaced by another woman of the aristocratic class after four years in office. Nevertheless, her spiritual and social ties to the spirit possession cult as well as her genealogical ties with members of the aristocracy made her an important asset to the UFN. Members of the cult, with which she remained closely associated, were often "courtesans," who as we have seen made up the nucleus of the women available to join the UFN. Wandara was the union's link to Hausa women, who for the most part were not as well-educated as Zarma women in western Niger, and to the "courtesans," who could most visibly represent the PPN's women's wing in Maradi. Having lost her politically significant position as head of the bori cult, Aisha Wandara could nevertheless wield some power by acting as the state's link between a modern structure for women and the network of women most available to participate in that structure. By integrating a figure from the local female aristocratic hierarchy into the UFN, the PPN could make a political analogy between traditional forms of representation for women and modern forms.

The existence of important titled positions for women in Maradi contrasts with the situation in northern Nigeria, where Pittin worked and where most research on Hausa women has been conducted. Local Maradi practices included women in the political process through titled positions for a few women in the aristocratic class, while commoner women could become prominent through the bori spirit possession cult, still practiced openly here and overseen by the Iya. Independent women could find some protection from the dangers of marginality through bori cult membership, so that many "courtesans" were also part of the broad bori network. Thus the UFN could attempt to temper the possible negative associations attached to members engaged in "courtesanship" by drawing on the traditional sanction for bori that, as former head of the bori cult, Wandara represented. The Iya is chosen from among senior women in the family of the ruler, and both the king (Sarki) and the Iya can lay claim to their right to office in part because their family is seen as
being closely allied with the bori spirits through inheritance: *su duk suna da bori* (they all have spirits). Such traditional sanction does not exist in northern Nigeria, where the cult is practiced very much in opposition to the desires of the Muslim rulers. The public acceptance of the bori cult, then, and the female title of *iya* altered the nature of women’s participation in politics in Maradi, making it possible for at least one variegated segment of the female population (including some aristocratic women, bori members, and “courtesans”) to participate in political events.

The early women’s association entertained major political figures and participated in dry-season gardening. However, it is not entirely clear that “courtesans” had much choice in the matter of their participation. While the women who acted as leaders of the UFN in Maradi deny that “courtesans” were coerced into participating, older women often associate the UFN with “courtesanship,” and in an interview I conducted in 1989 one former karuwa gave the following account of the experience of such women at the time:

**Hajjiya Gobarci:** Back then they took all the women who weren’t married, all the way from here and then all the way down the hillside, and they had to work a big field down in the valley, a government field.

**B. Cooper:** Did you enjoy that?

**Gobarci:** How could you enjoy that?! They’d do dances late at night then, at that time, I had just come out of my marriage. Heavens! You’d do dances for Diori when he came. (Hajjiya Gobarci 1989)\(^5\)

With Diori’s fall in 1974, the UFN slipped quietly into the background. When Kountché first took power, his government had a reputation for integrity and concern for the rural population devastated by the Sahel drought. As his regime began building the structures of the Development Society, local cooperatives and branches of the youth and women’s associations were initiated in areas outside of the capital.

The traditional Samaria youth organizations were revived by the government in 1976 in part to implement major development infrastructure and in particular to construct wells and classrooms (Decalo 1989, 190).

\(^5\) This and other interviews on which this discussion is based are available at the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University, Bloomington. The names of most informants have been changed to protect their identities. I conducted unstructured interviews in Hausa without an interpreter in women’s homes. I came to know most of the women fairly well through visits, informal conversations, and “participant/observation” over the course of the year. Much of what I discuss here came out in conversations that were not “formal” interviews (in other words, we were gossiping) and were not recorded.
Samaria comes from the word *samar*, which means “youth” and, in particular, “young man.” It generally refers to a man who has not yet gained enough experience and income to marry; it is also sometimes used by older men to refer to any junior male, married or not. In rural areas, when an invitation was sent out for men to work collectively on one another’s farms, the Sarkin Samari, the head of the junior men, called them to work. Unmarried girls would be called by the corresponding leader of the young women, and while the young men labored the girls would sing and dance to make the farmwork more pleasurable. Such collective gatherings or *gaya* have become rare in rural areas today; hired labor has replaced the collective workforce. Nevertheless the Nigerian government invoked this kind of collective work and festivity when it revived the Samaria in 1976.

The Samaria eventually became an important organ to encourage patriotism through the annual Festival National de Jeunesse, where youth groups from throughout the country competed for prizes for the best ballets and plays presented on national themes. The festival plays became an important part of the Office de Radiodiffusion-Television du Niger broadcasts and consequently had a broad national audience beyond their local regions. Samaria members were also conspicuous in parades and generally danced and sang in local celebrations to entertain important visitors.

The Association des Femmes du Niger (AFN) had a rather different genesis. In 1975, Kountché used the occasion of the International Year of the Woman to create a commission to study women’s problems and to hold a series of public debates at the Institute for Research in the Humanities. These debates surveyed important issues ranging from women’s status in the labor force to laws touching on women’s rights in the family to female education. While the efforts of the UFN to promote women’s issues, particularly those of educated urban women in Niamey, were recognized in passing, the Kountché regime quickly succeeded in redefining the terms of the debate: the interests of rural women were emphasized, and, therefore, women’s issues were seen as part of a broader national development agenda. The women’s association that emerged, the AFN, was consequently firmly in the hands of the Kountché regime. While the AFN had some success in advancing issues relevant to women, such as legal and available contraception, other important efforts met

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6 The *gaya* were disappearing in the Maradi region when Guy Nicolas conducted his research there in the late 1960s. See Nicolas 1975, 188. For the same institution in northern Nigeria, see Smith (1954) 1981, 59–60.

7 For a fuller discussion of Kountché’s control of the early development of the AFN, see Cooper 1992, chap. 7. For a more positive assessment of the accomplishments of the AFN, see Dunbar 1991, 69–89.
little success, most notably the AFN's persistent attempts to promote a family code more favorable to women. Despite Kountché's redirection of the women's association toward rural women's issues, the leadership and membership of the AFN remained concentrated in the major urban centers of Niamey and Zinder. For women in Maradi, far from the capital, the significance of the AFN lay not in its specific social or economic programs, which in the end touched their lives only very marginally, but, rather, in the possibilities the AFN presented for redefining women's roles and their access to public activity.

**Struggling for legitimate independence: AFN and Samaria**

Women in Maradi often see the UFN and the AFN as one seamless whole and use the same Hausa term to refer to both, 'kunjyyar mata (women's association). Nevertheless, when the AFN was set up in Maradi, Madame Aguiyar kept quietly in the background; any clear association of the AFN with the UFN in the wake of the military coup would have been dangerous for the survival of the women's association and possibly for Madame Aguiyar as well. In 1975 Aisha Wandara regained the titled position of Iya, making her the highest ranking woman in the aristocratic class. Wandara's acquisition of full authority over the bori cult and its members, many of them "courtesans," made her the most logical choice to head the new women's association. Nevertheless, given the linkage between the earlier women's association and the recently deposed Diori regime, no one was eager to step forward publicly to head the successor association. Aisha Wandara described how she came to be president of the new AFN in the same year that she regained the title of Iya.

In the end Madame Aguiyar said that she was tired, she said, "I can't do this anymore." So. She said I should become president, but I said I didn't want to. But then the Préfet sent to the Sarki [the traditional chief of Maradi and the Iya's brother], asking why not, saying I should make myself a candidate. So they made me a candidate. . . . Madame Aguiyar had put away her presidency, she said she was tired, and that we should choose a new president from among us. That was in the time of Kountché. So that was that, there we were: no one was saying anything. So then the Mayor asked the women: "Don't you women have anything to say? If there is no one else who wants to be a candidate, there is candidate Iya." He was reading from a piece of paper. And then everyone clapped and clapped [to cast their vote for her]. And that was that. (Iya 'Yar Wandara 1989)
It is clear from this account that both the local public administration and the traditional authorities, all of whom were male, were actively involved in creating the new AFN. When the Iya tells this story she tells it with great irony and humor: when leadership calls, one is not given an opportunity to turn it down.

The Iya was chosen to lead the new association for a number of reasons, one being her previous experience in the UFN. But the more significant reason was that she represented the intersection of several differing female interests in Maradi. As the leader of the bori spirit possession cult she represented female power, both political and spiritual: the AFN, like the UFN before it, needed that local form of power. However, the Iya also traditionally represents the women of the major aristocratic families of the Maradi court who spend a great deal of time in her compound. Finally, she also represents women more generally, for women come to her for advice and help, whether they are members of the bori cult or not. With the Iya at the head of the association, the government was assured of the sanction of an important cross section of Maradi women.

Despite the apparently seamless transition from UFN to AFN, the character of the new women's association was radically altered by the establishment of the Samaria youth movement. The Samaria evoked not gender but age and seniority as primary elements of social order. By calling upon the image of the collective work group under the authority of seniors, the Samaria heightened the differences between young women and fully adult (senior) women. In rural areas around Maradi the Samaria of the late 1980s in some ways resembled the traditional model in which unmarried boys and girls worked cooperatively for the community. The members were often boys and girls who were too young to marry and who were called upon to perform collective labor to the dancing and singing of the girls, which was accompanied by festive drumming. The groups also prepared plays and ballets for the national festival and helped with development projects such as well digging. In the town of Maradi proper, however, the Samaria groups had a rather different character. The membership was notably older; many of the young men were certainly old enough to marry (twenty-five to thirty-five years old) but perhaps could not afford to, and in some neighborhoods the girls were, in fact, young women, most of whom had been married at least once but were not any longer. Although the Samaria groups occasionally made an effort at dry-season gardening, their agricultural duties were relatively insignificant compared with their plays and ballets presented at the Maison des Jeunes and at the numerous political events that mark the year.

The character of the Samaria groups also varied immensely from neighborhood to neighborhood in the city of Maradi. In the most conservative
neighborhoods, only prepubescent girls were permitted to be members. In newer neighborhoods, where the availability of rental housing to this day increases the population of women who are neither living with kin nor married, the women in the Samaria were frequently “courtesans.” In the newer neighborhood of Sabon Gari, for example, all of the young women in the Samaria lived in “houses of women” (gidan mata). I asked a Samaria woman whether many of the members were karuwai, and she responded, “Not all of the women in the Samaria are karuwai, but lots of them are. Some of them are budurwa [unmarried virgins]” (Binta 1989). It is striking that she and the other women in Maradi I spoke to never contended that these nonmarried women were bajawara. Either Samaria members were “virgins” who had never been married (girls of ten to thirteen or so) or they were “courtesans.” There was no room for anything in between.

The original UFN was frequently associated with karuwai and with bori members (Nicolas 1975, 214). However, the existence of the Samaria after 1976 altered the composition and range of associations in which women took part. The women who became members of the AFN were all, at least in theory, fully adult married women. It was now the Samaria that was very closely associated with “courtesanship,” and the public and sexually mixed nature of their dancing and plays made the youth groups an appealing forum for women interested in public display.

One consequence of this division was that by the late 1970s and early 1980s women in the public realm no longer had a single forum in which to act together in the interests of women. Nonmarried women who were “courtesans” tended to join the Samaria, while married women and more “respectable” nonmarried women took part in the AFN. Whereas in the original women’s association many “courtesans” and bori cult members were participants, the AFN eventually had a less diverse membership. It is possible that the existence of the Samaria also altered the composition of bori cult membership. The number of “courtesans” who participate in the bori cult may have dropped; the newer forum for public display and the closer association with more modern structures made possible in the Samaria were more appealing, particularly to young women with some education. The Samaria of the late 1980s was far more closely associated with “courtesanship” than was the bori cult, which in the past was considered the preserve of karuwai. As the “courtesans” shifted to the Samaria, the political utility of the bori cult for female support dropped significantly. Furthermore, as Maradi has adopted stricter Islamist practices as trade ties with conservative northern Nigeria increase, the cult has become a political liability to politicians attempting to unite around

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8 For a discussion of such houses in Katsina, see Pittin 1983.
a common Islamic cultural heritage. Once the Iya resigned from the presidency of the AFN in 1987, the few remaining bori members stepped into the background, leaving the AFN mostly to educated women, successful traders, and their clients.

The Maradi region has been the battleground for competing interpretations of Islam since the founding of the city during the jihad of Uthman 'dan Fodio in the nineteenth century. The rulers of the Maradi region practiced an adaptive form of Islam that tolerated some practices (including female titles, the bori cult, and the separation of state offices from clerical offices) that the jihadists regarded as un-Islamic. The resistant forces of the Maradi valley succeeded in holding off the jihadists prior to colonial rule. Over the course of this century under colonial rule and since independence, however, the development of transport systems in Nigeria, the rise of peanut farming, and the flourishing petroleum black market have tended to foster linkages between the two former combatants—linkages often solidified by an idiom of Islamic brotherhood and shared Hausa ethnicity. Today, the merchant class collectively known as Alhazai (an honorific for men who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca) is extremely powerful economically and politically; it is among the wives of this class that stricter seclusion is emerging. Other men emulate the practices of Alhazai, even when secluded marriage is not economically feasible. The rise of this class clearly has had important political implications for postindependence governments, complicating further the question of how to mobilize female support and giving rise to attempts to bypass or co-opt this merchant base.

One negative consequence of the division of women into the Samaria, the AFN, and the bori cult was that it undermined any solidarity the women might have been developing as a unified political group in the UFN. This fragmentation of women could serve the interests of the ruling regime, for it would work against opposition voiced by women at a time when the government was preoccupied with the demands of unruly students. Nevertheless, this division had the unexpected consequence of creating a more expansive political space for married and unmarried women who were not in fact engaged in “courtesanship.” It is not entirely clear to me whether this space was consciously generated by Kountché and Saibou or whether it was an unintended outcome of the division of women between AFN and Samaria. Certainly, by generating two

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9 Grégoire 1992 documents the recent rise of ties between Muslim traders in northern Nigeria and Maradi.
10 While Hausa-speaking women who are not of the elite educated class frequently described this phenomenon in passive constructions that imply that some outside force consciously intervened to separate women into specific groups (“aka raba mata da karuwai” [they separated out the women/wives from the courtesans]), women in a position...
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potential forums in which women could participate, the government enabled a broader cross section of the female population to become visible in the political context. It seems probable to me that, while the separation of women was promoted to make it more possible for married women to support the military regime visibly, no one anticipated that this separation could have subversive and politicizing possibilities for non-married women. How did the creation of two groups give rise to such possibilities? I will argue that Maradi women themselves seized upon the occasion provided by these associations to debate, define, and renegotiate what it means to be “respectable,” “married,” and an adult “woman.”

Debating women

Women who were not members of either the AFN or the Samaria often confused the two and saw no real difference between them, characterizing their membership as *matan zamani*, a euphemism for prostitute that means literally “modern woman.” Members of the AFN, however, insisted on a difference between themselves and members of the Samaria. Members of the AFN were “married women” who engaged in respectable behavior. By separating the AFN from the Samaria, the government made it possible for married women to take part in public political manifestations without being grouped with unmarried “courtesans.”

What is the political significance of this linguistic differentiation? It enabled the Kountché regime and later that of Ali Saibou to promote a nationalism founded on the image of women as mothers and wives, even as it drew upon young women as a powerful form of entertainment and propaganda, harnessing the image of the “free woman” as an icon of modernization. For women this also meant that those who were not “courtesans” could participate in political events, at least in principle, without damaging their reputations. Married women found a forum suitable for women of their status. However, the designation of AFN women as “married women” also made it possible for women who were not immediately interested in marriage to claim a terrain of public action without having to pretend to be potential wives (*bajawara*) under the tutelage of a senior male. This was new ground that the government, perhaps inadvertently, made available and that women themselves laid claim to and reinforced through dialogue among themselves and through public performative statements about what it meant to be a married woman.

to know more about actual strategies and directives from the party in power declined to discuss the subject, which they evidently regarded as politically sensitive. Nothing I have found in the published accounts from the period clarifies this question.
To return to the issues raised by Pittin in her work, while women had a sphere of their own and at times a language that reflected their values as opposed to those of men, the opposition that Pittin found in Katsina did not emerge in Maradi: one does not find that women refer to non-married women as bajawara while men call them karuwai. Rather, some women distinguish between different kinds of non-married women, clearly separating non-married women who exchange sexual favors for gifts and cash from non-married women who earn other kinds of income. Certainly women in Maradi are attempting to create a public arena in which non-married women can participate without being stigmatized as karuwai. Rather than subsume all non-married women into the category bajawara, however, they have accentuated distinctions among women and between the kinds of activities non-married and married women engage in to give moral legitimacy to the independence of some non-married women.

This act of legitimizing certain kinds of independence is extremely important for married women as well as for non-married women, for if women who are married are to participate in the public political and economic domain they must be able to do so without any suggestion that they are behaving improperly and, in particular, without their being associated with women who are publicly known to engage in “courtesanship” or “prostitution.” Where women in the Samaria danced and sang, AFN women at public gatherings made an attempt to behave in a dignified manner, clapping and chanting slogans. Women of the AFN chose behavior suitable to their purported age and marital status. Gatherings of the AFN could be very jolly affairs, but the form of the festivity needed to be distinguishable from that of the Samaria. Where Samaria women were openly flirtatious, AFN women deferred to men without being subservient. This image of AFN women had become current nationally, as Janet Beik’s observation of the stereotyping of AFN members for a play in Zinder illustrates: the director instructed the actresses “to shake hands with the préfet but not to bow over in respect (as traditionally women would do when meeting an important man)” (Beik 1987, 109).

Samaria women had equally clear notions of suitable behavior for themselves. I asked one karuwa if the “courtesans” could join the AFN if they wanted to; she responded that they could but that it would be hard to get along with married women whose husbands might be clients and that, in any case, “there’s no dancing in the women’s association, so it wouldn’t be appropriate” (Hajjiya Gobarci 1989). The young Samaria members clearly enjoyed their dances and plays immensely, and no one seemed to feel that their behavior was inappropriate for their age or status as young girls and karuwai. One way a “courtesan” could
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demonstrate that she was a responsible citizen promoting the interests of
society was to participate in the Samaria. Whereas in the past such
women might have sought safety and refuge in the bori spirit possession
cult, now they could turn to the government-sanctioned Samaria for
legitimation, community, and protection.

While there were many AFN members who were not in fact married,
their approach to legitimating their independence was to behave in a
manner that resembled the married women as much as possible. They
always wore headcloths and veils; they appeared restrained in public;
they sat or stood with the married women in a crowd; they deferred to
the older leaders of the association. They behaved as if they were married
women. Nonmarried AFN members were generally very hard-working
women, who made do with meager incomes and relied in part upon the
generosity of their AFN patrons to help them stay out of “courtesan-
ship.” Some originally came from rural areas and had few connections in
Maradi. A few were very successful traders or producers, but the more
successful nonmarried women were invariably older—often old enough
to claim that they were too old to bear children and thus not planning to
remarry. A few were government functionaries whose careers made re-
marriage difficult.

Some nonmarried women in the AFN may have been bajawara, but all
were not necessarily looking for a marriage partner. Their approach,
rather, seemed to be to associate themselves with women who were
responsible, respectable, and married in order to maintain such a reputa-
tion for themselves. Since a Maradi woman’s status as an adult is so
closely associated with her status as a married woman, by mimicking the
behavior of married women, nonmarried women could establish them-
selves as fully adult women. Ironically, the most subversive implication of
this performance was perhaps that these women were beginning to dis-
associate female adulthood from marriage (the equation of “woman” and
“wife”); in appearing publicly as mata (adult women) and not samari
(youth) they forced the public recognition that some fully adult women
were not, in fact, married. This subversion has the further potential to
disrupt the heterosexist assumptions embedded in the association of full
female adulthood with marriage and childbearing.

It is perhaps worth noting that I, too, was engaged, something less
than fully consciously, in a performance of “marriedness” and “respect-
ability.” I covered my head with scarves and wore relatively modest
clothing: opaque skirts that fell below the knee and blouses that covered
my shoulders. I was not feigning marriage, for I was truly married;
rather, I was making visible my marital status in a setting where it might
not have been readily legible otherwise, given my husband’s absence for
most of my research. My respectable dress, my independence, and the
fact that I had appeared before my contacts in the AFN fully approved through government channels made me, in effect, an excellent prop in their staging of respectability, marriage, and adulthood. I was close to the same age as many of the nonmarried women in the AFN, and I publicly engaged in my own work without participating in "courtesanship," which meant that my appearance alongside AFN women could be seen as an asset. This, I think, explains in part why AFN women insisted that I join them in the most public of events and why they were dismayed by any prospect of my squandering this capital by being seen with the women of the Samaria. Conversely, by encouraging me to be seen publicly with them, they helped me to reinforce my own image as a married woman.

Participation in the AFN was thus one way a woman could establish a reputation as an upright adult who behaved respectably, even if she was not married. This pushing at the edges of an accepted social category—matan aure (married woman)—is analogous to the stretching of other kinship and social categories. Just as older divorced and widowed women, despite their greater freedom of movement, were nevertheless treated as if they were married women, so these younger women mimicked married behavior and, in so doing, helped to redefine it. This verbal manipulation of categories is similar to the strategy Catherine Coles observed among Hausa women in Kaduna: younger women manipulated the category of "old women" (tsofuwa) in order to enjoy the greater mobility of women beyond childbearing age (Coles 1987). However, such strategies are not guaranteed success. Popular perception of AFN women in Maradi was not always generous, and some women in search of a marriage partner might temporarily bow out of AFN activities to avoid any possible association with "free women" and to make their availability for remarriage clear.11

Women argued among themselves about what constituted appropriate behavior, and their appearance in external public spaces following various behavioral norms was a way to create new public norms and perceptions of women. The following interchange in 1989 between the Iya and her niece, Rabi, illustrates the kinds of debates current in Maradi at that time. It is typical of many conversations I heard in which the respectability and status of various women was negotiated and established through gossip. Note the self-characterization of an AFN woman that her association is an association of "married women," while the Samaria is for karuwai. The debate is unusual in that I happened to tape it while

11 One of my nonmarried acquaintances who had participated in street sweeping with married women in the AFN was severely chastised by her family for "going out with the Samaria." She stopped going to AFN events altogether in order to maintain a respectable image for potential suitors.
conducting a formal interview with the Iya into which Rabi intruded (Iya 'Yar Wandara 1989). I asked the Iya whether there had been many *karuwai* in the women's association when it was started. I used the general Hausa expression *'kunjiyar mata* for “women's association” rather than either of the French acronyms AFN or UFN.

B. COOPER: When they first started the women's association, didn't they call upon lots of *karuwai* to join?

IYA: *Karuwai?* Yes, at that time the *karuwai* were put into the association.

RABI: No, that's not right. They did not put *karuwai* in!

IYA: Well, they were the ones who weren't in seclusion; there were lots of them. All the married women were in seclusion.

RABI: No, it's only recently that they've put the *karuwai* in!

IYA: No, today the married women are the majority.

RABI [challenging]: Where are they?

IYA [amazed at the question]: The married women in the women's association? There are lots of them! The *karuwai* were all left to the Samaria.

RABI: They separated them?

IYA: Yes. Each of the women you see is a married woman who has a husband. She has the strength of her own home. She may be an old women whose husband has died; now she isn't a *karuwa*. You see, she has her own home, her daughters and children. She's not a *karuwa*. There aren't *karuwai* in the women's association.

(Iya 'Yar Wandara 1989)

Two things strike me about this interchange. First, Rabi, who was not a member of either the Samaria or the AFN, did not initially see any difference between the two; because the Samaria was so highly visible, she thought of the Samaria when she heard me ask about *karuwai* and the women's association. Her remark that the *karuwai* had only entered the association recently may reflect her memory that when she was much younger the traditional rural Samaria work groups did not include “courtesans,” more common in urban settings. Second, although the Iya knew very well that many of the women in the AFN were not married, when she generalized about AFN membership she described the typical AFN member as a married woman, a woman with *'karfin 'dakinta* (the strength of her own room or home). The expression is evocative, for it suggests both married women who have enough influence with their husbands to be able to go out to AFN gatherings, as well as any woman, married or not, who has the ability to maintain herself and her children or dependents in a home or room of her own. A woman who has the “the
strength of her own room” does not rely upon a man to pay her rent, although she may rely upon her children for help. A woman who has been successful in trade might even own or rent a house herself. The phrase thus calls to mind a woman with either some economic self-sufficiency or enough intrahousehold stature to be able to negotiate with her husband for a degree of independence and mobility.

In the same exchange, Rabi, unconvincing, went on to enumerate women whom she considered to be karuwai in order to prove that the women’s association included them as members; the Iya explained to her that each of them was actually in the Samaria. Shifting tactics, Rabi then got Iya to name women in their neighborhood who were members of the AFN. Rabi pointed out that several of the women mentioned were not married. Iya then argued that they were older women who are beyond marriage age. Finally, Iya mentioned one woman who she conceded engaged in “courtesanship”:

*Iya*: There’s only one woman who has done karuwanci. [They establish the woman in question.] But she isn’t a karuwa.

*Rabi*: Good heavens, Hajjiya, she is too a karuwa, I swear to God!

*Iya*: Well, just because you are struggling with poverty doesn’t make you a karuwa. So she’s having trouble. She just got into it.

*Rabi*: That’s not true. She’s been at it a long time. She didn’t just start. (Iya ’Yar Wandara 1989)

*Iya* was willing to make exceptions for a woman who is temporarily having trouble making a living, but in her own mind she made very clear distinctions between women who engage in karuwanci and women who for the most part avoid it.12 *Iya* could distinguish among degrees of reliance upon gifts related to sexual favors and among different ways of associating with men. Rabi was less willing to see these distinctions, and as a married woman who rarely went out and saw little of how the two associations functioned, she had little understanding of why *Iya* would argue that some independent women are not karuwai. Note that neither woman made use of the word bajawara, which did not seem to be relevant to the discussion they were having.

This is not just verbal sparring, for much hangs on the issue of whether a woman, married or not, can take part in public activities—from politics to trading to education—without the perception of sexual impropriety.

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12 One reason it can be difficult to distinguish a karuwa from a nonmarried woman who lives on her own is that sexual access, even for married women, is closely associated among the Hausa with gifts, and any courtship, whether sexual relations are involved or not, would also necessitate many gifts from the man.
One of the factors limiting girls' education in Maradi, for instance, is the perception that it is inappropriate for a young married woman to go out to school. In a region where girls marry shortly after the onset of puberty, this perception is a powerful constraint to female education. The use of young girls as hawkers for married women who cannot leave the home to carry out their trade also serves to discourage women from sending girls to school. Of the many battles that the women's associations could be waging, one of the most important is to earn for women the right to be seen publicly without being stigmatized morally. As we have seen in the conversation above, this is a battle that is waged not simply with men but in debates among women themselves.

Conclusion

Since 1990, Niger has been drawn into the current of multipartism and democratization sweeping across West Africa; the Ali Saibou regime was forced in 1991 to cede power to a national conference, which was to prepare the ground for the democratic national elections held early in 1993. It is, I think, an impressive measure of the success women have had in contesting external political space that on May 13, 1991, women in Niamey staged a well-publicized and highly visible protest against the virtual exclusion of female representation from the National Conference Planning Committee. While the powerful national trade union had managed to eliminate all other "democratic" institutions created or co-opted by the Saibou regime from the planning committee (including the Samaaria and the Islamic Association), women staged a massive demonstration in the capital when the AFN was denied any representation. While the protest was organized and initiated from the Niamey offices of the AFN, the size of the demonstration and its success in forcing the inclusion of six women on the planning committee, despite the AFN's affiliation with the discredited Ali Saibou regime, suggests that women's rights to assemble in external public spaces and to have a voice in national politics are now broadly recognized. If the Saibou regime attempted to co-opt women for its purposes, one might argue that women themselves managed to co-opt the AFN to gain representation for women even once the party with which it was originally allied had lost credibility.

Whether women will be successful in pressuring the current coalition government to approve the National Conference's proposed Family Code and Rural Code, both of which would have significant implications for the status of women in Niger, remains to be seen.13 I must thank Roberta Ann Dunbar for sharing a study that she and Hadiza Djibo prepared in Niger during the National Conference. It discusses in detail the rural and family codes and presents a favorable account of the AFN's efforts since 1975. See Dunbar and Djibo 1992.

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current preoccupation with enormous financial difficulties (already severe before France’s recent devaluation of the West African franc), student unrest, and disruption from Tuareg militants makes it unlikely that women’s concerns will be foregrounded in the near future. Nevertheless, women have demonstrated a willingness and ability to work together and appear publicly to promote representation of their interests in the national forum.

The subtle manipulation of verbal categories setting out distinctions among women and establishing appropriate behavior for women of different status has been important in earning women the right to appear in such public demonstrations. The solidarity of women in May 1991 may have been possible only through a prior fracturing of women as a group: by emphasizing difference and establishing boundaries for behavior, women could open avenues for a broader segment of the female populace to appear openly in a political context than has recently been possible. That women in this instance carried banners of their own choosing rather than slogans for a male-dominated party shows how powerful this tactic has been.¹⁴

This tactic, however, is fraught with contradiction. By setting themselves apart from the karuwai and the Samaria, nonmarried and married women have played into the cultural stereotype that presents female sexuality as immoral and that defines proper behavior for women only in terms of marriage as the norm. The nonmarried woman can retain respectability only as long as she looks and acts in dress and demeanor as if she were married. By emphasizing differences and divisions within the female body politic, women also run the risk of emphasizing tensions and conflicts with one another rather than with men. One thinks of the karuwa who remarked that it would be hard to get along with the married women of the AFN when some of their husbands are clients: the division between the two women’s groups makes it possible for such women to avoid the immediate friction of meeting one another directly, but it also heightens the sense that the enemy is “those other women” rather than the men whose affections, attentions, and (perhaps most important) incomes are thus divided. If the cohesion of Pittin’s female subculture is largely illusory, nevertheless, the fragmentation of women’s groups itself distracts attention from some of the key sources of friction in gender relations in Maradi—sexual double standards, polygyny, Islamic repudiation, and early marriage of women. These practices are

¹⁴ I do not wish here to reduce the politicization of women in Niamy to merely a consequence of debates among women in Maradi. Women’s participation in politics in Niamy is a story deserving its own full treatment. I am suggesting instead that part of what made the women’s march of May 1991 possible was the negotiation of a space for “respectable” women in public political forums by the AFN and that this accomplishment must be counted as quite a considerable success despite other setbacks for the women’s association.
given powerful sanction by their purported origins in Islam in a context in which Islamist solidarity is becoming an important factor in generating nationalist sentiment. The force of Islamist ideology in a general climate of resentment toward Western economic and political intrusion is considerable and has set the parameters within which women in Niger can realistically militate for change. As the *bori* cult and the women’s associations have become separated, women have become distanced from alternative readings of Islam and spirituality. Consequently, women in the national associations find themselves subject to a potent Islamist cultural nationalism with little in the way of spiritual or religious alternatives to provide different models for women’s roles in religion and society.

The dangers as well as the promise of the politics of difference have been evident throughout the transition to civilian rule. The visibility and audibility of women throughout this process generated a backlash against young women of precisely the ambiguous status discussed above—secondary school students of marriageable age. In the market at Zinder several such women were beaten and stripped because of their “immodest” dress, and one was hospitalized (*West Africa* 1993). A powerful measure of the positive potential in the ongoing process of negotiating women’s entry into public space is that in such a moment large numbers of women rallied behind the young women rather than criticizing them for not dressing and behaving as if they were married women: once again women in the capital marched to protest these attacks and succeeded in forcing the government to intervene with police force (McCarus 1993). While the attacks show how vulnerable single women are in times of national stress and suggest that Islamist sentiments are growing not only in Maradi but throughout the country, these incidents also show how important the work of establishing women’s access to external public space is and how tenaciously women in Niger are now fighting for that access. This negotiation is still in the process of unfolding, and the alliances, divisions, and redefinitions women call upon in struggling for visibility and recognition are likely to shift many times.

The politics of difference underscores rather than erases the very real divergences within the female populace, emphasizing in subtle ways age differences and seniority, marital status, education, class, and rural versus urban origins. The interests of all women in Maradi or in Niger are not the same and in some cases run directly counter to one another. However, despite the gains that this strategy seems to have won for women in Niger, it is not clear whether or how women in Maradi will move beyond the divide depicted here. Nevertheless, despite the considerable constraints women in Maradi encounter—within the household, the local economy, the national political arena, and the global economy—in terms
of their access to critical resources, mobility, and education, they have been actively engaged in renegotiating gender relations and have found means, albeit contradictory, to counter some of the obstacles they face.

To borrow Judith Butler's formulation, this study can be seen as "an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity" (1990, 34). In reworking what it means to be a "married woman," Maradi women are subverting the most taken for granted of gender categories and enabling alliances between married women and nonmarried women. This is not, of course, the conclusion of a struggle but, rather, the emergence of a movement. To have made a beginning toward staking claim to the right to enter into the external public spaces of formal politics and large-scale trade is an extremely important first step toward achieving economic independence and political autonomy.

Like Teresa Ebert, I would like to see feminist analysis of culture take a more critical turn to link cultural and transformative politics. In her formulation, critique should produce "historical knowledges that mark the transformability of existing social arrangements and the possibility of a different social organization" (Ebert 1992–93, 9). I fully agree with Ebert that structures of systematic exploitation cannot be addressed by "interventions" that simply read particular localities as "texts" through which to celebrate the free-floating play of disembodied signifiers. Nevertheless, it seems to me from my work with women in Maradi that it is not possible to make sense of how unequal socioeconomic arrangements are reproduced or transformed over time without taking into account how the key differences through which inequity operates are reconstituted or redefined. As Ebert herself expresses this issue, "the relation of signifier to signified is not a free-floating play of signification but an ideological process in which the signifier is related to a matrix of historically possible signifieds" (1992–93, 17). Ebert's hostility toward microlevel analysis suggests that for her the real is located primarily in macrolevel structures, while microlevel conflicts and struggles for meaning are merely manifestations of broader forces. I believe that such a theoretical stance is profoundly disabling for any materialist analysis of female agency and possibility; it dismisses in advance those arenas of action in which indigenous feminisms are most likely to emerge, in however contradictory or limited a fashion. In this study I have attempted to demonstrate that women in Maradi have been engaged in microlevel
redefinitions of difference in an effort to respond to and recalibrate their own positions within the broader regional and national political economy. Women engage in this activity precisely because differential access to key resources falls primarily along lines defined by understandings of proper gendered behavior.

I would argue, therefore, that close consideration of the language and performances of women is not a retreat into playfulness or a ceding of the more important ground of larger structural forces in favor of the unproductive celebration of “localities.” Learning to listen means taking seriously the likelihood that women in such local settings know far better than anyone else what the range of options and constraints available to them looks like and can best imagine where to begin refiguring those parameters in their own interests. In writing this piece, I was reminded of Marjorie Mbilinyi’s “learning to listen” to Rebeka Kalindile; part of learning to listen in that instance meant taking extremely seriously the threat of physical violence that women in particular settings may experience as part of the constraints that define what is and is not possible, what is and is not safe (Mbilinyi 1989). Learning to listen also means accepting that “women” is not a unified category and that if women participate in the construction of gender they also participate in the construction of differences that advantage some women at the expense of others. Ebert’s call to arms is telling: “Critique enables us to explain how gender, race, sexual, and class oppression operate so we can change it” (1992–93, 10). But who is the “we” here? And in what sense can all of these forms of oppression be reduced to a single “it”? If oppressions were singular and internally consistent, they would be much easier to combat. The danger of critique as a call to arms, particularly if the author of that critique is positioned well within the overdeveloped world, is that the author will be speaking so ardently that she cannot listen, cannot notice that she is part of the problem. Listening means acknowledging that sometimes the axes along which difference is defined will appear at first to be unconstructive, irrelevant, or counterproductive to an outsider who can not see what is at stake. What is to be hoped is not that “we” can get the axes to line up properly in a utopian armature of perfect alignments but, rather, that these differentiations can remain fluid and provisional, so that further movement may be possible in the future. It may be that the most important thing I gave back to the women I worked with in Maradi was to stand in the hot sun with the “married women,” wondering just what all the fuss was about.

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References


