Gendered Modes of Resistance: Power and Women's Songs in West Africa

By Brian Hogan - University of California, Los Angeles

Biography

Brian Hogan is an ethnomusicologist, drummer, and percussionist currently pursuing a PhD in ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research areas include African and African American music, with specializations in xylophone practice in West Africa, and jazz performance in the United States. His current research projects include a biographically centered depiction of Lobi xylophone music in Ghana through the perspectives of two blind xylophonists, a chronicle of the life and death of world renowned Lobi xylophonist Kakraba Lobi, and the article published here on gender and power as they relate to women's verbal arts in West Africa.

Abstract

For many women in West Africa, the verbal arts are a crucial medium of political contestation, social unification, and personal expression that flourishes where written discourse fails. With regionally, nationally, and historically variable literacy rates amongst women in West Africa, the pervasiveness of culturally established oral traditions, and the substantial linguistic diversity of most all West African countries, song remains a uniquely powerful mode of expression for West African women. In Niger, Nigeria, and Guinea in particular, women have historically challenged socio-cultural norms and political formations through song, as is documented in the ethnographic works of Africanists Beverly Mack, Saidou N'Daou, Aissata Sidikou, and others. Through performative acts of resistance, these female poets, singers, and activists confront many aspects of West African life, ranging from low literacy rates amongst women, immodesty by young Muslims, and the challenges of maintaining traditional Islamic practice, to the discontents of polygamy, the patriarchal organization of Muslim society, and the large scale political mobilization of rural minorities. Yet these songs, slogans, and performances are not inserted into the fabric of daily life without contestation or disruption, nor do they unanimously achieve their goals. Surveying the diversity of purpose, form, content, and effectiveness of West African women's verbal arts, this article examines why women choose song as a strategy for empowerment, exactly how they contest and breach structures of inequality through song, and to what extent they succeed in their goals.

Song as Empowerment

Women of all ages in West Africa, despite the relative scarcity of their voices in contemporary histories and political discourses, continue to confront local social issues and transnational political conflicts through performative acts of resistance. Sometimes illiterate and often relegated to subordinate social status, many women across West Africa engage the challenge of social unification and mobilization through verbal arts that promote social solidarity and political action. While generally not afforded the same access to institutions and mechanisms of social change as men, West African women have maintained longstanding discourses and dialogues through alternative strategies, cutting through the hegemony of the written word and patriarchal political discourse with performative oral traditions. While these expressions of socio-political empowerment are as diverse as the nationalities, ethnicities, and life experiences of the people encapsulated in the broad category "West African women," I focus here on women's songs in Niger, Nigeria, and Guinea as a way to begin to understand how West African women voice their struggles and selves in the context of powerful national and transnational political flows. By attending to oral modes of expression, I promote an expanded historiography that includes contemporary forms of verbal and musical expression as a way of understanding the experience of rural and lower class predominantly Muslim West African women, whose perspectives are not always addressed in African literature. Rather than approaching written and oral expression as opposed, my goal is to examine the ways in which oral expression effectively functions in social contexts where written expression does not. Such social contexts include not only communities where literacy rates are low, but also communities in which cultural critique or political mobilization cannot safely or effectively be achieved through writing. Often spontaneous and fleeting, oral forms of expression both comment on and constitute historical narratives of West Africa. Through the ensuing discussion of women's songs, we begin to understand the agency West African women from different regions, countries, and communities exercise in relation to restrictive religious and social frameworks, as they manipulate and reinterpret social structurings for their own empowerment. With a long history of social contestation by women in West Africa that likely predates written records, we can also identify the advantages of the verbal arts as a strategy for confronting inequality from the

position of women in West African society. In the three recitative traditions that I examine here, we find West African women defining, reacting to, and reshaping their worlds through a communally authored and communally accessible creative artistry.

The scope of this discussion extends across national and ethnic boundaries, as well as several decades of African history to locate contrasting degrees of sociopolitical resistance in African women's songs. I draw examples from Niger in the 1990s, Nigeria in the 1980s, and Guinea in the 1990s, as well as during Guinea's struggle for independence in between 1946 and 1958. My goal in comparing these contexts of expression is to illustrate the contrasting effectiveness of verbal arts as a strategy for empowerment, using ethnographic works of three Africanist scholars as a foundation for the analysis of expressive strategies amongst West African women. Beverly Mack's *Muslim Women Sing: Hausa Popular Song* (2004), Saidou N'Daou's *Sangalan Oral Traditions: Histories, Memories, and Social Differentiation* (2005), and Aissata Sidikou's *Recreating Words, Reshaping Worlds: The Verbal Art of Women from Niger, Mali, and Senegal* (2001) each portray complimentary dimensions of women's oral expression in West Africa, hinting at the diversity of the verbal arts in the West African context. I have chosen these particular contexts of Guinea, Niger, and Nigeria because of the temporal closeness of the authors' fieldwork in each area, and because each musical practice engages a different type of audience through song. While Hausa women in Nigeria primarily sing to a community of female peers, Hausa and Songhoy-Zarma women in Niger perform to an audience of peers while also communicating dissent to the community as a whole through the spectacle of their performances. In Guinea, women of numerous ethnicities engage a national audience through their decidedly more politically charged songs, sung in opposition to colonial and post-colonial political formations.

Content on this page requires a newer version of Adobe Flash Player.



[1]

Turkaka Music of Kano - September 1st, 1999.

This group of elder Hausa women, led by a single lead vocalist, create a polyrhythmic foundation on k'warya gourd idiophones over which various praises are sung. This recording provides a sense of the strong character that typifies women's organizations such as those discussed here, as well as the polyrhythmic use gourd bowls. Note that the k'warya are struck with sticks, beaten with hands, and suspended in water, all for different timbral effects.

One of the central issues addressed in this article is why, and to what degree verbal art is effective as a strategy for women's empowerment. This entails an examination of the complicity or disempowerment that also breathes through these forms of cultural expression. In their introduction to *Women in Developing Countries: Assessing Strategies for Empowerment* (2002), Rekha Datta and Judith Kornberg stress that empowerment is a fluid and dynamic term that has different meanings in different cultural contexts. They point out that women's empowerment cannot be easily assessed, noting the importance of differentiating between empowerment as a process, and empowerment as an outcome. This distinction helps us to understand that while the outcome of resistance may be intangible, the process of resistance remains a source of strength and momentum for women's organizations and movements in developing countries throughout the world. There are also varying levels and degrees of empowerment, experienced differently by individuals in local and national communities. After introducing the three main oral traditions represented in the works of Mack, N'Daou, and Sidikou, I turn to an analysis of women's songs and verbal art in terms of the degrees of empowerment and complicity they project, rather than trying to brand each as radical or complicit.

Reconciling Islam and Empowerment

Islam has become so deeply embedded in African life and culture in Nigeria, Niger, and Guinea that it is impossible to understand women's expressions of discontent with certain aspects of society without placing it in the context of Islamic practice. Putting aside dogmatic stereotypes of women *under* Islam, I focus instead on the ways that Islamic practice is interwoven with the existing structures of inequality and injustice that these women oppose. With

the widespread discourses of Islamic feminism that circulate in Africa and across the globe, it would also be inaccurate to confine the ways that women engage Islam to the verbal arts, or even conscious expression alone (Cooke 2000). Instead, let us place these forms of resistance within an expansive discourse of Islamic and non-Islamic practice, manifested in many different forms in today's local and global religious/political formations.

The religion of Islam reached the savannah region of West Africa in the 8th century C.E., marking the beginning of written accounts of West African history. It spread throughout the early empires of the Kanem-Bornu and Songhay, and across Mali and Hausa-Fulani land, as evidenced by epigraphic evidence from the 11th century C.E. (Moraes de Farias 2003). Surveys and estimates indicate that by the 1980s and 1990s nearly half of West Africa was Muslim, with deeply entrenched religious practice based on complex histories of social, cultural, and religious integration. When we consider the countries discussed here, the prevalence of Islamic culture is obvious. In 2007, the Muslim population was estimated at roughly 85 percent in Guinea, 80 percent in Niger, and approximately 50 percent in Nigeria (CIA 2007).

With the pervasiveness of Islam in West Africa, much of women's public activity continues to be conducted in relation to behavioral guidelines dictated by local religious communities. These Islamic codes vary regionally and are embedded in distinct cultural worlds, yet also retain degrees of observance of the worldwide Shariah. This generally results in the gendered division of activity and labor, and consequently in the gendered division of public and private space. While somewhat permeable, these boundaries between public and private space are maintained by locally *and* globally inherited gender roles that are historically deeply rooted in daily practice. In the music of Muslim West African women, we find several different invocations of this experience of Islam. Sometimes contested, other times reified and amplified, Islamic practice is a common theme in women's music, often emerging in the context of the assertion of an African Muslim identity. Thus in an attempt to understand the degree to which women are resisting and responding to society, culture, and Islam, it is important to understand these concepts as deeply interconnected and overlapping.

I approach these issues of cultural contestation from three different angles. First, by looking at the oral poetry of Hausa women in Kano, Nigeria in the 1980s, I explore dialogues between women and their local communities surrounding issues of women's rights and obligations. Second, I turn to the verbal art of Hausa and Songhoy-Zarma Nigerien women in the 1990s as an example of an empowering expressive practice, one which creates a public counter-hegemonic narrative to polygamy in Niger. Verbal art in the context of these songs is used to create a critical public space for the contestation and digestion of constrictive patriarchal social practices. Third, I recall the political mobilization of women of several ethnicities in Guinea in the 1990s, and its antecedents in the 1940s and 1950s. Political mobilization in Guinea has historically been achieved through songs and slogans, authored and sung by women. Through my discussion of women's role in Guinea's political history, I address the tangible empowerment these forms of oral expression achieve in West African contexts. Because of the paucity of research in this area of women's verbal art, I draw examples from women of Niger, Nigeria, and Guinea, acknowledging major differences in the cultural, historical, and political currents of each nation, and the differences between women's experiences within and between these nations. I believe there is much to be gained from this juxtaposition, as it illuminates the strategies employed by West African women to contest and reshape their immediate social contexts, and demonstrates the ways in which they critically reinterpret Islamic and other social frameworks for their own empowerment.

Hausa Women in Nigeria: Voicing Collective Experience

Hausa culture in West Africa is known for its widespread integration and dissemination of Islamic practice, maintaining a reputation as conservatively Muslim. Stretching across the West African hinterland, Hausa cultural and linguistic influence speckles nearly all of West Africa. The prevalence of Islamic themes in women's music in Nigeria is to be expected, especially in light of the conflicts surrounding Islam in Nigeria. The marked differences in culture and custom between the northern and southern majorities in Nigeria have been major sources of socio-political tension. Despite these circumstances of conflict, Hausa culture is widely characterized as conservative and focused inward toward the family unit. When looking at Hausa women's songs in Nigeria, then, it is fascinating to see the maintenance of a conservative lifestyle conveyed through a form of expression that also radically transgresses gender norms.

In *Muslim Women Sing: Hausa Popular Song* (2004) Beverly Mack documents the musical repertoire of Hausa women poets, demonstrating how they "inspire audiences in myriad ways, simultaneously proclaiming their religious obligations to domesticity and declaiming—reclaiming—their equal rights under that same Islamic law" (Mack 2004:12). Hausa women's songs generally take the form of praise poetry, admonitions to the local

community, eulogies for local and national figures, and interpretations of current events. The role of women's poetry for social mobilization in the region dates back to social reforms introduced in the jihad of the 1800s by Shehu Usman dan Fodiyo against the Hausa, actualized for women by his daughter Nana Asma'u, who became prominent as a scholar and exponent of women's intellectual potential under a critical interpretation of the Qur'an. Nana Asma'u used oral poetry to communicate to illiterate or uneducated women, creating a transmittable series of teachings that extolled the virtues of an active public life and challenged the practice of seclusion. While Nana Amsa'u wrote in Arabic and Fulfulde, her teachings were effective because of their oral form. While several of the poets that Mack researched during her fieldwork in the 1980s could also write, their songs primarily proliferated orally. This oral form was especially effective in light of women's illiteracy rates in Nigeria, which have dramatically declined from 78% in 1980, to 70% in 1985, 62% in 1990, 52% in 1995, 44% in 2000, to 39% in 2003 (CIA 2007, UN Common Database 2007 [UNESCO statistics], Globalis 2008).

Wife seclusion (*kulbe*) is one of several Islamic practices that has caught international attention through the work of women's rights activists. Generally framed for the international community as an example of women's disempowerment, seclusion is given a more nuanced treatment in Nigerian, Nigerien, and Guinean women's songs. Hausa women's songs often address the restrictions of seclusion, while simultaneously recounting the moral dangers of street life, and offering specific guidelines for how to live a proper life as a practitioner of Islam. While often only practical for middle to upper class Muslims who can pay someone to go to market, seclusion can be viewed as strengthening women's domain of influence at home while restricting their sphere influence to include only the family and local community of women. Alternatively, seclusion can be viewed as an extension of oppressive systems of control exercised by men over women. While I believe there is no definitive interpretation, my interest here is to demonstrate the ways in which this and other Islamic practices are invoked and interpreted in women's songs.

Hauwa Gwaram, an educated Hausa poet and teacher whom Mack recorded and interviewed, recounts the virtues of traditional Islamic practices in many of her oral and written poems, impressionistically outlining the experiences of women who stray too far from traditional Islamic practice. In the following excerpt from a performance recorded by Mack, she promotes the wearing of a full veil for women, pious and modest activity in public, and dependence upon men as mandated by God:

> I will stop here and rest, sisters,
> Continue to be pure,
> I will clothe myself properly,
> A body cover is mandatory,
> A full veil is best for women
>
> May God forgive us our sins,
> He has mandated that our men,
> Provide for us with patience,
> May He ease our troubles,
> A full veil is best for women.
> (Mack 2004:139-140)

This particular poem demonstrates the use of sung verse to promote specifically Islamic values, expressed by an independent woman who was twice divorced and very well educated. While in this song she promotes the maintenance of certain Islamic values, her life history offers clear evidence that she transgressed other Islamic prescriptions for women's activity. Preceding the song is a monologue by Gwaram, in which she explains the inspiration behind this particular composition. She recounts her observation of women walking immodestly down the street, engaging in morally questionable activity, and generally projecting an attitude of religious impiousness. Such lived experiences give Gwaram's poetry strength and authenticity, helping us to understand why Gwaram prescribes a somewhat conservative lifestyle in light of her own achievements.

Hausa poetry itself evolved out of a long-standing tradition of Islamic poetry spoken in Arabic and Fulfulbe, which later crossed over into Hausa (Mack 2004). Influenced by the couplet and five-line form of this longstanding poetic tradition, the tradition of male Hausa poetry occupies the space of a formalized cultural expression, with well-established stylistic guidelines. While Hausa women's poetry stands in opposition to the gendered restrictions on women's public performance, it draws heavily from traditionally masculine recitative forms.

We find evidence throughout the ethnographic data of women working with preexisting cultural concepts and materials that maintain traces of patriarchy. What is remarkable about the artistic expression of the women in these cases is that they manipulate these typically masculine concepts, categories, and practices for their own productive ends. In so doing, they both buttress and subvert the power structures that perpetuate their position of social subordination. This complicates the popular conception in contemporary scholarship that women's experience forms a kind of subordinated and subjugated knowledge (Foucault 1984). While applications of Foucault's schema of power relations have been essential to feminist projects, it seems that the case of West African women's song complicates the extent to which we can envision the poles of empowered and disempowered as mirroring masculine and feminine gendered expressions. Instead, gendered forms of expression are manipulated to navigate culturally inherited power relationships while recasting them in the wake of contemporary lived experience. Women's expression in African Muslim communities does seem to reflect the decidedly male gaze of Islamic culture, and in that sense is subjugated to the panoptic gaze of a male oriented worldview. Yet as Mack's research suggests, women dissect this gaze in private spaces, and perform various transgressions of it in public spaces, while preaching to other women about the possibilities for fulfilling lives that extend beyond the boundaries of acceptable women's activities under more orthodox interpretations of Islam.

The field recordings of linguist Robert Randell displayed here demonstrate some of the ways in which Nigerian women in Kano perform interpretations and transgressions of gender dynamics in local life. This excerpt of *shantu* music features a leader chorus based composition accompanied by *shantu* idiophonic percussion. The song text introduces, in succession, several prominent ethnicities and common occupations in Nigeria as potential suitors for the singers' daughters. For each ethnicity/occupation introduced, the singers subsequently provide a reason why they would not like their daughter to marry them. Indulging in stereotypes and playful critiques, this performance extends beyond the bounds of proper behavior for many Muslim women in West Africa. Like Mack's research, Randell's videos offer a window into the discourses of contestation and acceptance of gender roles in Hausa communities in Nigeria.

Content on this page requires a newer version of Adobe Flash Player.



[1]

Shantu Music of Kano - September 3rd, 1999.

Singing in Hausa while accompanying themselves using the shantu gourd idiophone, these Hausa women of Kano, Nigeria cover a range of topics in their performances through a leader/chorus based narrative.

These videos are used courtesy of Robert Randell, Professor Emeritus of Linguistics, Stanford, who made these recordings while conducting linguistic research in Nigeria. Translations of the song texts provided by Russell Schuh, Professor of Linguistics, UCLA.

Real and Imagined Communities: Empowerment and Complicity

Through Hausa women's poetry, we can see how individual poets communicate with an imagined community of women. Saidou Mohammed N'Daou, through his research on early 1990's Sangalan oral traditions in Guinea, (which I will discuss later) suggests that these oral performances constitute "embodied ideologies," which in turn function as "social imaginary worlds" (2005:183). Similar to Benedict Anderson's theory of the imagining of community through textual forms (1983), women's songs also render their audience a unified community of women who share similar perspectives and experiences. Given the religious and moral content of Hausa women's songs, these women also seem to be invoking a sense of belonging in a larger Muslim community, similar to the concept of Dar al-Islam. It is here, in the space between immediate and projected community, that the project of empowerment can run aground: women's ascription to a larger Muslim community can smooth over oppressive institutions, framing them as the natural outcome of Islamic practice.

The concept of Dar al-Islam (the "world of Islam") was invoked daily in the context of colonial Senegalese life to enact a kind of "imagined community" that gave Senegalese Muslims a sense of place within a global community of Muslims while simultaneously making them vulnerable to the manipulation of that category by state propaganda (Robinson 2000; Anderson 1983). As David Robinson notes in *Paths of Accommodation* (2000), the concept of Dar al-Islam was used both for the empowerment and disempowerment of African Muslims, as it provided a foothold for ideological manipulation. He identifies the political position of Sufi orders in colonial West Africa as mediating between local and colonial culture, allowing African Muslims to maintain internal religious, social, and cultural independence while cooperating with their subjugation to colonial political and economic exploitation. Robinson suggests that in the case of Senegal the French manipulated the concept of Dar al-Islam in order to effectively assert control through Sufi orders and thus govern Muslims in West Africa. This strategy also allowed France to situate itself inside the sphere of the Muslim world, protected by a façade of local governance and religious freedom, which veiled economic and political subservience to the French empire.

With regard to the expressive traditions of Muslim West African women, it is thus crucial to consider the ways in which religious frameworks and communities can be manipulated for political ends. Robinson's research reminds us that the yoke of colonialism was effective because it infiltrated preexisting social structures. Thus we may be wary of the remnants of relationships of inequality active in the expressions and expressive forms of female African poets. For example, to what degree does asserting a Muslim identity mean accepting the terms of social subordination for women in Muslim society? Alternatively, to what extent does critiquing the gender divisions that underlie Islamic practice perpetuate stereotypes about the disempowerment of women under Islam? To begin to address these questions of the residue of culturally embedded power relationships, I move now to women's verbal art in Niger as an example of the mixed outcomes of oral performance as a means of social empowerment.

Song as Interpretation and Manifestation: Women's Songs in Niger

Niger, like Nigeria, has longstanding traditions of men's and women's performed poetry that can be differentiated by several distinct formal qualities, including the use of specifically gendered language in each respective recitative tradition. Acknowledging such differences, women's songs in Niger are in general structured both formally according to traditional men's songs, and contextually to the patriarchal political structures of society, reinforcing the notion that women rework preexisting cultural materials towards their own productive ends. Drawing from Aissata Sidikou's field research conducted between 1994 and 1996 in the Songhoy-Zarma region of Niger, I will discuss below the *marchande* and *maani foori* songs, which are sung in the context of two unique public events. In these performances a ritual space is created for the expression of resistance to the limitations imposed on women in the overwhelmingly rural context of Nigerian life. These songs constitute the one form of verbal art of a rural and largely illiterate population, with a 1995 United Nations report placing women's illiteracy rates in Niger at 93% (UN 1995). In light of the impossibility of textual discourse, these songs act as a critical tool for the assertion of women's rights, existence, and opinions within Songhoy-Zarma culture. Like the case of Hausa women in Nigeria, the Songhoy-Zarma women of Niger engage in a meta-criticism of society through a performed parody of the rationality, sensibility, and naturalization of male dominance (Sidikou 2001:59).

While Niger has a wide distribution of ethnicities, it is mainly divided between the Hausa and Songhoy-Zarma peoples, with the Hausa comprising 35% of the total population, the Songhoy-Zarma 21%, the Tuareg 11%, the Fulbe 10%, the Kanuri-Manga (Kanem-Bornu) 5%, and the Tubu, Arabs, and Gourmantche each less than one percent. Each ethnic group has played a major role in the diffusion of Islam in Niger, and remains predominantly Muslim, placing Islamic practice at the heart of their cultural reality. There is considerable cultural continuity between Hausa settlements in Niger and Nigeria which facilitates comparative research of Hausa culture across national borders. In this discussion, I explore both the verbal art of Hausa women and Songhoy-Zarma women. In comparison with Hausa verbal arts, the Songhoy-Zarma exhibit a more overt form of social criticism enacted through ritualized performances that have a decidedly rougher and more sexually explicit edge. This comparison of women's oral poetry in Niger and Nigeria focuses on the success of the strategies they employ to confront the particular social conditions of their lives.

Of the numerous cultural performance forms that permeate Hausa and Songhoy-Zarma life, the *marchande* and *maani foori* stand out as exceptional examples of the contestation of local patriarchal social practices. The *marchande* is a Songhoy-Zarma mock ritual performed by the senior wife in a polygamous marriage as a response to her husband's recent or impending marriage of a new wife (polygamy being common practice in Niger). When marrying a new wife, a man is expected to pay his first wife for the pain he causes her through his new romance. This money is often used by the senior wife to fund the gatherings at which *marchande* is performed, gatherings which entail satirical costume, dance, and song. Over time, the *marchande* ritual has increasingly become an

occasion for crude and sexuality explicit insults directed at the husband, his new wife, and their families. The following excerpt from a *marchande* song voices the anger of a senior wife towards her husband and his new wife:

> *Tobey tobey*, [rabbit]
> Spray pepper in our eyes
> By Allah we will spray it back
> *Tobey tobey*,
> We will rub it on his testicles
> So he puts it in his new wife's eyes,
> So he puts it in his new wife's vagina,
> She will not be able to sleep,
> She will not be able to sit.
> [June 19,1994, Niamey, Niger]
> (Sidikou 2001:196)

Sidikou interprets this change as resulting from contemporary women's increasing anger and frustration with polygamy. That frustration is now manifested in more outward and direct forms of ridicule towards women's husbands and their new co-wives (2001:58). Sidikou also suggests that the *marchande* functions as a way for senior wives to voice their discontents with polygamy while also asserting their position of authority within the family unit. We may additionally read this ritualized performance through Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, wherein the inversion of hierarchy and the temporary alleviation of social tensions is achieved through satirical dance, mimicry, and expressions of ridicule (Bakhtin 1941). With respect to questions of empowerment and complicity, Victor Turner's interpretation of the carnivalesque suggests that while such ritual inversions and transgressions do subvert social structures temporarily, they ultimately enable those structures to endure. He suggests that such expressions of resistance are often contained to culturally accepted spaces where the tensions that might otherwise lead to the alteration of a social system are legitimated and vented (Turner 1982).

While these interpretations are thought provoking, I suggest that *marchande* songs represent a form of ritual subversion that creates considerable tension and contestation when inserted into daily life. Men, their families, and their new brides will not attend *marchande* performances, nor do they support them despite the fact that it is their payment to the senior wife that funds it. Men also strongly object to the coarse language that women use in *marchande* and to the personal attacks against family members, both of which are serious offenses in their Muslim society. Thus many *marchande* performances are enacted in secluded, but still public spaces. While the messages of these slanderous performances do not fall directly on the ears of men, they are clearly circulated within the local community of women, even among women who would never otherwise make such derogatory remarks (Sidikou 2001:56). Especially given the increase in direct criticism of men and polygamy in *marchande* songs, I interpret this song form as generating an effective form of resistance that, while not preventing polygamy, contests it with increasing intensity. It also creates a separate ritual space for social resistance that allows women independence from the deterministic context of a local male gaze. The use of otherwise utterly taboo language attests to this intensity, as women step considerably outside the bounds of acceptable social behavior to voice this critical perspective on polygamy.

At the same time, when we look at the *maani foori* songs of both Hausa and Songhoy-Zarma women, we can also see ways in which verbal art as protest does not entirely breach the boundaries of this patriarchal gaze. The *maani foori* celebration and its accompanying songs embrace the changes a woman's body makes as she ages. After a few weeks of increased food consumption, the ritual performance of *maani foori* celebrates the fattening of women as a source of individual pride and communal fortune for a year of plentiful harvest. The song texts generally proclaim the plump beauty of the singer, compliment family members, but also ridicule women who have not yet become fat. Both a sign of beauty and status, fatness is a desirable feature for many West African women, as is the case for the performer of the following song, who anticipates her future beauty:

> "Fat" is Gold.
> It is beautiful on everyone's chest.
> I have *Dara's* back,
> I have *Dara's* chest,
> Once I am "fat,"

With my father's blessings I will reach this.
Dara should *daramu*.
The *songolol* [tall, skinny] one will not dance *dara*.
(Sidikou 2001:72)

Dara is a dance step that requires fat to dance properly, and this singer's invocation of *dara* is a way of marking her body as fit for the public eye while simultaneously marking skinny women as unfit. In this song the association between thin women and unhealthiness or ugliness stands in contrast to the overt celebration of the virtues of fatness. This dichotomy complicates the degree to which we can interpret *maani foori* songs as empowering since, in addition to access to food, natural variation and metabolism govern women's body types. The value and femininity associated with the female body through these songs seems to perpetuate the equation of women's worth with their physical appearance. Thus even while celebrating the process of aging, the *maani foori* ritual also reinforces a hegemonic ideal of beauty that is complicit with the objectification of women by men.

Reflecting on the *marchande* and *maani foori* rituals, the contestation of polygamy and assertion of personal beauty in each respectively are evidence of the use of verbal art as a strategy for empowerment and resistance to repressive societal norms and institutions. Yet this verbal art is not always aimed at undoing these forms of masculine ideology, and can promote complicity with societal standards that ultimately marginalize many women. While the structural relations of power are often clearly contested in women's oral poetry, there seems to be a degree of both rejection and acceptance of the status quo in these oral performances.

The question then arises whether or not it is possible for women to mobilize against and overcome structural inequalities through what are largely internal dialogues to the community. In the case of Hausa women in Nigeria, we saw how they effectively maintained discourses of resistance within local communities. Hausa and Songhoy-Zarma women in Niger extend this practice into more public spaces with a daring sense of indecency that challenges and mocks accepted social norms. Yet to what extent, practically speaking, does this production of knowledge as power through song extend beyond the local spheres of influence of Muslim women and men? It seems clear that colonial, post-colonial, and global social structures can be critiqued through song, but can the verbal arts effectively breach such hegemonic influences and ideologies? In order to understand how cultural agency in the form of socially mobilizing songs can coexist with and perhaps confront political and economic exploitation, let us now move across the Sahel to Guinea, where women's songs were instrumental to the removal of the French colonial yoke from the Guinea.

Vehicles of Experience, Instruments of Resistance: Women's Songs in Guinea

Guinean women maintain an international reputation as politically active and socially radical, partially through the crucial role they played in Guinea's independence movement from France between 1946 and 1958. After their political action in Guinea's general strike of 1953, Guinean women became the backbone of the Guinean RDA, acting as promoters, disseminators, and reformers of the grassroots political movement that led Guinea to vote "No" to France's offer of membership in Fifth French Republic. The RDA (Rassemblement Democratique African) was an international alliance that promoted political unification across colonial boundaries in the project of African autonomy (Schmidt 2005). Guinean women of differing class and, significantly, of differing ethnicity joined the struggle, as the RDA shaped its goals according to the needs of its members who were predominantly women and rural peasants. The RDA's success can be understood against the backdrop of several ethnically associated political organizations active at the time, none of which were able to achieve mass political mobilization because of ethnically specific political agendas (Schmidt 2005:33-34). The broad issues of health, education, sanitation, and family cohesion that were so important to women regardless of their ethnicity, took a central position in the RDA's political agenda—which was not the case when the RDA was founded in 1946. This explicit appeal to women's needs was partially a clever act of anticipation by the political party's leaders, but was actually made possible by the ideas circulated by Guinean women in the form of songs and slogans, which were disseminated and repeated across the country.

As with the recitative forms we have surveyed from Nigeria and Niger, the ideological resistance of Guinean women spread because it was encapsulated in oral performances. Writing on the political strategies utilized by Guinean women, Cynthia Schmidt notes that:

Most Guinean women were not literate and thus were largely beyond the reach of the party tracts and

> newspapers. Women therefore devised new, more appropriate methods of communication. They composed songs and slogans to communicate among themselves, with the party leadership, and to interpret the leaders' messages in terms they found meaningful. (Schmidt 2005:114)

As mentioned earlier low literacy rates, in addition to tremendous linguistic variation, are reasons why oral expression thrives where written text dissipates. Guinean women were able to translate songs and slogans into various languages and dialects through their linguistic aptitude without having to worry about codifying it into the written word. As a medium for ideological dissemination, song was thus exceptionally well suited for the mobilization of rural and non-literate populations of Guineans. It is important to note that the messages these women sang were sometimes long and complex, reinterpreted through the creativity of individual performers. In this sense these songs and slogans may be, as Karin Barber (1999) has pointed out in the Nigerian context, acting as "texts" which have an iconic form that is reworked in the context of performance. Yet, while the degree to which a song maintains an iconic form throughout a series of performances varies, what is of interest here is the pragmatic difference between written texts and oral performances.

The following excerpt provides an example of a song sung by Guinean women in support of Ahmed Sékou Touré. Castigating a political rival, Barry Diawadou, the women sang:

> Barry Diawadou left Conakry
> To go to Upper-Guinea
> Because he found
> That *Syli* is always in the lead
> Barry was slapped like a dog
> The penis of Barry is circumcised this time!
> (Schmidt 2002:289)

The final two lines of the excerpt metaphorically strip Diawadou of his status as a man, removing societal markers of masculinity. As with the verbal art of the Hausa and Songhoy-Zarma, Guinean women utilized modes of expression and language that remain socially unacceptable for men or women, in order to voice their aggressive political agendas. Schmidt suggests that Guinean women were more revolutionary than any other group active in the struggle for Guinean independence precisely because they transformed the methods for political mobilization through their activism and performances.

What is remarkable about these songs is that they are both, as S.M. N'Daou (2005) suggests, vehicles of a cultural experience and instruments of ideological resistance. Writing on Guinean oral traditions in the 1990s, N'Daou identifies the maintenance of social memory in Guinean oral performances, framing such performances as impositions of the Guinean self in a national and international ideological struggle (2005:183). From N'Daou's work, we can see that verbal art as a strategy for resistance endured through the post-colonial era in Guinea, remaining a vital strategy for mobilization against the PDG (Parti Démocratique de Guinée) between 1958 and 1984. Evidence of this is found in the working-class' opposition to the PDG's cultural revolution, expressed in slogans and songs sung by men and women, which conveyed their discontent with increased taxes, inflation, and lack of social services (2005:190).

As an instrument of ideological resistance, verbal arts seem to do more than simply create "social imaginary worlds," as N'Daou suggests. While maintaining spheres of association and influence between social and political formations, these verbal arts constitute a counter-hegemonic expression not only of community, but also of local and national history. They project a vision of the past, present, and future; a shared social memory that reclaims narrative agency for the purpose of engineering a class-based identity. We may view this expression as part of what Dominic Thomas (2002) articulates as the "engineering of the nation," since oral expression competes with written literature and propaganda to create, or perhaps manufacture, power in the post-colonial state. Viewing the verbal arts of women in particular as part of the larger ideological battles waged through nationalist propaganda and print culture promotes a sort of Bahktinian "polyvocality," which expands the imagining and engineering of community to include subaltern perspectives (Thomas 2002:2). The voices of women, and indeed entire rural communities, are often lost in historical accounts that focus on the prime movers in political conflict. Thomas' assessment of women's verbal art as potent, publicly visible, and intentionally crafted to subvert hegemonic narratives, expands the terrain of local and national power struggles to include the ritual space created in songs

and performances of resistance. Through this sensitized historical lens, we can see that women in Guinea exercise a tangible political influence through song that does effectively expand beyond the boundaries of a local existence.

Amplifying Women's Histories in Muslim West Africa

Rosalind Shaw, in her work *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (2002) identifies the presence of an active and dynamic historical memory in ritual practices in Sierra Leone. She argues that despite the absence of public discourse on the transatlantic slave trade, the historical era and its abuses are remembered in non-discursive forms. In this survey of women's songs in Niger, Nigeria, and Guinea, I have shown how West African women not only maintain and distribute a collective perspective through verbal art, but also use orality as a prism through which they perceive and project their contemporary reality. While discursive, women's oral performances do not receive equal recognition with textual and other patriarchally ordered discourses. Following Shaw's identification of historical memory in carefully encoded ritualized practice, I locate processes of historical and social memory in women's poetry, song, and oral performances. What is crucial about the use of orality as a mode of expression is that it cuts across ossified social boundaries and categories which generally prevent women in West Africa from establishing and maintaining shared discourses, especially between classes. Through West African women's interactive, creative, and communally authored performances, we find a model for the dissemination of knowledge based on creativity that functions very differently from state apparatuses, or even subaltern literatures. The creativity involved in these endeavors represents a critical strategy against the hegemony of the patriarchal structuring of knowledge worldwide, which extends influence into local ideologies and ways of knowing. As a method of recasting and reasserting inherited social dynamics, the verbal arts constitute a critical mode not only of representation, but also of re-representation.

Having surveyed only some of the many ways in which women create local dialogues, enact public rituals of contestation, and engage in national and transnational political conflicts, we can see that their efforts are effective precisely because their expression extends past the reach of formal education and literacy. Women's oral expression communicates to a broader population than does African women's literature. In the poetry of Hauwa Gwaram, an educated and independent Hausa woman, we saw the prescription of a pious religious life by to an imagined community of local women, whom Gwaram interpreted as only loosely embodying Islamic values. In our discussion of the *marchande* and *maani foori* rituals of Niger, we caught a glimpse both of the tensions surrounding Islamic practices for women, and their strategies for alleviating this tension through a collective parsing of the injustices of polygamy. Finally with women's songs in colonial and post-colonial Guinea, we found a clear example of the political salience of women's voices, achieved through songs, slogans, and public political activism. From these examples, we may thus conclude that African Muslim women poets and performers react to and process local and national influences through their verbal artistry, while simultaneously reforming Islam to reflect the increasingly progressive views of contemporary Muslim women, who draw upon the currents of international feminism (Cooke 2000).

The examples offered here demonstrate the diversity and potency of the verbal arts of West African women. Through their songs and poetry, African women maintain their own oral traditions and histories that differ from those of men who continue to be at the center of oral history projects. Bettina Haeussler's outstanding work on the now deceased Alhaji Mamman Shata is an example of one such (intentionally) male centered oral poetry project which has many interesting points of contact with the oral traditions discussed here. Alhaji Mamman Shata, one of the most widely known and adored Hausa poets and musicians of the now elder generation, recorded numerous albums and became a man of considerable wealth. In Haeusller's work, "A Poet of the People: Orality and Music in the Songs of Alhaji Mamman Shata" (1987), several of Mamman Shata's songs are transcribed and interpreted, including "*Sha Ruwa*," which critiques the Islamic taboo against the consumption of alcohol. This particular song represents a contestation of typical Islamic practice that is similar to those depicted in the preceding examples by female poets, yet there is a considerable difference. Mamman Shata, because of his gender and fame, enjoyed considerably more freedom to voice opposition to Islamic practice than most female poets.

Muslim women have been the focus of this inquiry because of the prevalence of Islam in West Africa and the differing social positions that men and women generally hold in Muslim (and global) society, though it seems incorrect to frame these women's expressions of discontent and their imagining of a better future as responses to Islam alone**.** In our attempts to understand the historical experiences of women throughout West Africa, we must attend to oral performances as both vehicles of identity and instruments of ideological contestation. This requires that as researchers we must likewise utilize alternate strategies for research and documentation in order to successfully depict and amplify women's lived experiences and engagement in local, national, and transnational discourse**.** These alternate strategies take multiple forms, and so it would be treacherous to outline one specific

tract for disciplinary development. Following the writings of several of the scholars mentioned herea—Mack (2004), N'Daou (2005), Sidikou (2001), Shaw (2002), Thomas (2002)—as well as many others, we see that African scholars and historians are more than ever compelled to conceive of African history as a series of dialogues between established discourses (written texts, political propaganda, etc.) and subaltern discourses, encapsulated in an abundance of cultural performances that require patient parsing. Thus in amplifying the experiences, voices, and histories of women in West Africa, part of our project is, like the songs of West African women, one of ideological struggle, of projecting an interpretation of reality against powerful apparatuses of knowledge production. If we are to learn from the strategies of the poets, musicians, and activists studied here, we must consequently employ methods that successfully depict the oral forms of expression that permeate West African life as powerful mediums that both manifest cultural critique, and encode it into cultural memory.

References

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. 1941 (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Barber, Karin. 1999. “Quotation in the Constitution of Yoruba Oral Texts.” In *Research in African Literatures* 30(2):17-41.

Comaroff, Jean & John. 1992. *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*. Boulder: Westview.

Cooke, Miriam. 2000. “Women, Religion, and the Postcolonial Arab World.” In *Cultural Critique* 45:150-184.

Datta, Rekha and Judith Kornberg. 2002. “Introduction: Empowerment and Disempowerment.” In *Women In Developing Countries: Assessing Strategies for Empowerment*, edited by Rekha Datta and Judith Kornberg, 1-10. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Foucault, Michel. 1984. *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books.
_____. 1982. *The Subject and Power: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics.* ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

“Globalis.” http://globalis.gvu.unu.edu/indicator_detail.cfm?Country=NG&IndicatorID=126#row [2](Accessed September 4, 2008).

Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Trans. and ed. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. New York.

Haeussler, Betina. 1987. “A Poet of the People: Orality and Music in the Songs of Alhaji Mamman Shata.” M.A. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Hunwick, John. 1996. “Sub-Saharan Africa and the Wider World of Islam: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives” In *Journal of Religion in Africa* 26(3):230-257.

Mack, Beverly. 2004. *Muslim Women Sing: Hausa Popular Song*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

N’Daou, Saidou Mohamed. 2005. *Sangalan Oral Traditions: Histories, Memories, and Social Differentiation*. Durham: Carolina University Press.

Parrinder, E.G. 1959. “Islam and West African Indigenous Religion.” In *Numen*, Vol. 6:2. pp. 130-141.

Robinson, David. 2000. *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Schmidt, Elizabeth. 2005. *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939-1958*. Portsmouth NH, Heinemann.
_____. 2002. "'Emancipate Your Husbands!' Women and Nationalism in Guinea, 1953-1958." In

Women in African Colonial Histories, edited by Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi, 282-304. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Shaw, Rosalind. 2002. *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Sidikou, Aissata. 2001. *Recreating Words, Reshaping Worlds: The Verbal Art of Women from Niger, Mali, and Senegal*. New Jersey: Africa World Press.

Moraes de Farias, Paulo Fernando. 2003. *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuareg History*. New York: Oxford University Press for the British Academy.

“The CIA World Factbook." https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/ [3] (Accessed March 20, 2007).

Thomas, Dominic. 2002. *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Townsend, Leslie. 1990. “Out of Silence: Writing Interactive Women's Life Histories in Africa.” *History in Africa* 17:351-358.

Turner, Victor. 1982. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.

“UN Common Database.”http://data.un.org/Search.aspx?q=Nigeria+literacy+women [4] (Accessed March 20, 2007).

United Nations, 1995. *The World’s Women, 1995: Trends and Statistics*. New York: United Nations.

Source URL: https://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/13/piece/498

Links:
[1] http://www.adobe.com/go/getflashplayer
[2] http://globalis.gvu.unu.edu/indicator_detail.cfm?Country=NG&IndicatorID=126#row
[3] https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/
[4] http://data.un.org/Search.aspx?q=Nigeria+literacy+women