

Muslim Women in a Multilingual Context: Orality and Literacy in Francophone Afro-Islamic Societies

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the impact of multiple historical, educational, religious and political trends on the interplay between language usage, orality and literacies as related to Muslim women in postcolonial Niger. The main theoretical thrust of the paper is to demonstrate that contrary to the commonly held view about multilingualism as a barrier to trans-ethnic national communication in Africa, the cultural, educational and linguistic realities of Muslim women in Niger leads to the observation that multilingualism and code-switching can serve as a collective lingua franca in a way that aids inter-group intelligibility. The first part of the paper presents a theoretical overview of the history of women's education/literacy and its interplay with gender in (post)colonial Niger Republic. The second part provides an ethnographic account of the impact of the multiple and overlapping traditions of multilingualism and literacies as they shape differently the life of one Nigerien woman. From these linguistic and literacy experiences, we begin to see how the concept of multilingual lingua franca operates in real life.

2. A Historical and Theoretical Overview of Women, Orality and Literacy

The field of education and its interplay with gender is one cultural arena in Niger Republic where the convergence between Africa's indigenous traditions, Islamic heritage and western legacies, is best at play. But while I use terms like "tradition," "indigenous" and "western" in exploring this historical experience, I wholly share the views of the late Nigerien educational psychologist Idrissa Diawara to the effect that:

...even as we refer to the remote eras, the question of an autonomous social development must be looked at with great reserve. For the phenomena of contacts, exchanges, and borrowings are such that it would be vain to try to establish a distinct picture of cultural elements that were 'originally' created in the milieu from those evolving from the phenomenon of diffusion (Diawara 1988: 10)

The discourse on education in Africa cannot be divorced from the development of literacies and their connection with orality. As a result, almost throughout this paper, education and literacy/orality are considered as integral components with overlapping meanings. Several studies of literacy across cultures have demonstrated the oral/literate continuum in discourse as well as in modes of imparting knowledge (Mack 2004, Street 1984, 1995 and 2000, Heath 1983). As Jacqueline Jones Royster rightly points out in her study of literacy streams and social life changes among African American women:

Knowledge is grounded in experiences; conventions and traditions can be treated with great skepticism; notions of truth and insight are rooted in the particularities of time and place and thereby subject to revision. With such protean genre, inevitably, there is possibility –even probability –of fluidity and flexibility in the meaning-making process. In other words, there is an opportunity for oral and literate practices to merge variously. (Royster 2000: 31)

Beverly Mack further shows that even those Muslim women who acquire knowledge through the written word often tend to favor oral means of imparting and (re)constructing knowledge (Mack 2004).

In looking at education and literacy, then, it is crucial not to continue marginalizing those women in Nigerien societies who have contributed and continue to contribute to knowledge production from within the spaces of orality. This is particularly significant in a society like Niger where orality characterizes the life of the majority of the population regardless of gender. Alidou's *Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women and the Politics of Agency in Postcolonial Niger* (2005), Mack's *Muslim Women Sing: Hausa Popular Song* (2005) which focuses on the verbal artistry of Northern Nigerian women, Hale's *Griots and Griottes* (1998), Sidikou's *Recreating Words, Reshaping Worlds: The Verbal Art of Women from Niger, Mali and Senegal* (2001), for example, are excellent illustrations of the wealth of orality of the women of the Sahel, in general, and of Niger, in particular, in the realm of song and poetry. Elsewhere, along with many other literary critics I have also demonstrated how African women's oral genres, for example, have been appropriated by male writers and scribes in the production of literature in local languages or European languages (Alidou 2002, Stephens 1981).

The postcolonial promotion of girls' formal education in Niger Republic has fostered the development in the 1990s of a nascent Nigerien women's literary culture in the French language. This trend is illustrated by the acclaimed short story of Helene Kaziende entitled 'Le Déserteur' (The Desertor, 1992). Much more recently we have begun to witness the publication of women's novellas in national languages, as exemplified by Fatimane Moussa-Aghali's award-winning autobiographical novella written in Hausa language, and entitled *Yarintata* ('My Childhood', 2000). The publication of literature distinctively Nigerien in national languages and French was the initiative of a bilingual (mother-tongue-French) educational program by the Ministry of Education through the sponsorship of the German development foundation GTZ. This is a significant development in Niger Republic given the country's past reliance on written literature produced in Nigeria for texts in Hausa and Fulfude languages and from other Francophone countries or France for texts in French. This is a new and exciting area of research that is yet to be investigated.

Larrier's study *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean* offers even broader and more complex theoretical understanding of Black women's orality in Francophone Africa, which includes Niger, and the Caribbean, creating the possibility of the transmission of knowledge by women in a wide range of "oralized" domains that include literature, painting, pottery, textile design and fashion (Larrier 2000: 14-44). It is equally important to examine how the cultural ethos and didactic values of Nigerien societies as embedded in women's oral narratives impact on gender ideologies and the consequences of these ideologies on women's identities and access to literacies/education.

The evaluation of the politics of women's literacy practices is more than urgent now that the overall educational system is in a state of chaos throughout Africa, in general, and in Niger more acutely. Looking at how women are or are not being accommodated within the new educational reforms is pertinent to this study, especially in a context where the patriarchal state and international educational planning agencies often sideline developmental issues pertaining to women for other "priorities." What is even more problematic about the marginalization of women's needs in literacy/education (as well as in public health and agriculture) is how historical arguments, often coached in patriarchal interpretations of religion (Islam), are deployed by local as well as international policy-makers and implementers to justify their lack of commitment to women's literacy/education. The call by the renowned Moroccan feminist sociologist, Fatima Mernissi to women scholars in the Muslim world to rethink how masculinist hegemony appropriates Islamic history as a tool to justify anti-women agenda, especially in education, is also relevant for the Nigerien context. In this regards, she rightly observes:

Historical argument seems to be crucial to questions concerning the rights of women in Muslim theocracies. This is because all kinds of state policies to do with women, be they in the economic sphere (the right to work outside the home), or in the legal sphere (issues concerning personal status or family law), are justified and legitimized by reference to the tradition of the Prophet, that is, to historical tradition. Progressive persons of both sexes in the Muslim world know that the only weapon they can use to fight for human rights in general, and women's rights in particular, in those countries where religion is not separate from the state is to base claims on religious history. (Mernissi 1996: 92)

The recent history of gender inequalities in literacy/education programs in Niger can be traced to the colonial period. Smock makes the following observation in her introduction to women's education in the former British colonies:

The development of western education within the framework of a Victorian mentality and a dependent economy, consistently led to the exclusion of women from the educational system...The European conception of females as helpless homebound creatures, inclined administrators to favor the admission of boys to the limited number of places available. (Smock 1981: 254)

Similar observations have been made about the plight of women's education in the Muslim francophone countries like Morocco (Sadiqqi 2003:190), Algeria (Lazreg 1994: 63-64) and Niger Republic (Djibo 2001: 79-80). Lazreg observes that Frenchmen, even in their own society, did not recognize the principle of equality between men and women which made them totally unwilling to consider women as either legitimate interlocutors (even if inferior) or worthy instruments in the construction of the new colonial order (Lazreg 1994: 63). Consequently, the female colonized African subjects were considered little in the colonial project of the so-called "French civilization mission," a project in which education in the French language was assumed to uplift them from their "state of savagery."

Given the two facets of the nature of French domination –hegemony rooted in the emasculation of other men and hegemonic patriarchy over the female colonized subjects – when the first private French Catholic missionary school opened its doors in 1949 in Niamey, it only admitted male students with the irony of having a French Catholic nun as its headmistress. Gender ideology within the French colonial framework in Niger shows how the colonial women were (made) agents in this conquest and also how their agenthood did not involve a sensitivity to colonized native women, for only in 1961 did the private Catholic mission school begin to open its doors to female students in a sex-segregated set up. This gap of twelve years (between the introduction of schooling for boys, on the one hand, and for girls, on the other) is very significant in what came to account for the gender gap in educational opportunities and outcomes between male and female in the national colonial as well as postcolonial dispensations.

The denial of colonial education to women affected their chances to participate as direct agents in the western style capitalist economies (Amadiume, 1998). However, this outcome was to be expected given that western capitalism is framed within a patriarchal ideology that did not incorporate women as "wageable" productive labor outside the household. Thus, European colonialism not only further marginalized women from the public sphere of labor economies, but also added a new hierarchy on literacy practices in the society. In the case of Niger, the new literacy inherited from French colonization, which imposed the use of Latin script and the French language as the sole medium of instruction, severely under-valued the pre-existing forms of literacy practices in Arabic language and *Ajami* script (i.e. indigenized version of the Arabic script) and placed them at the bottom of the literacy pyramid. As Egbo points out more generally, with African women

...excluded from educational opportunities, wage labor, politics and government, colonialism increased and consolidated (at great cost) the gender-base of social chasm that may have existed, leaving women unprepared for the emerging world order which their societies were fast becoming an integral part of. At least such was the case up until the late 50s. (Egbo 2000: 3)

The factors that hindered women from having access to educational opportunities during the pre-colonial and colonial eras extended into the postcolonial dispensation. These have combined with new types of constraints, notwithstanding the well-meaning rhetoric of nationalist leaders, and other international educational funding agencies about African women's empowerment through the decrease of the gender gap in literacy and education. The fact is, the underlying intent and goal of the various educational projects and reforms undertaken throughout Niger's recent history are rooted in hegemonic

patriarchal local and international frameworks and tend to incorporate women only for instrumental purposes, not for women's own advancement.

Furthermore, numerous studies in educational philosophy have demonstrated that literacy/education is not a neutral enterprise. In any culture, literacy/education is conceived within an ideological framework that serves to attain defined aims (Heath 1983; Eickelman 1985: 57-71; Scribner and Cole 1988; Street 1984 and 1995, Gee 1995). To this extent, the multiple forms of educational, literacy and orality practices in Niger are embedded in the ideologies of power that define the values they assign to the practices as well as to the individuals who develop the imparted skills.

Moreover, this interplay between orality/literacy/education and power must address the place of women in this dialectic, especially in the case of predominantly Muslim societies where "the women's question" -- not "the men's question" -- is almost taken as correlating with the identity of the entire nation, as Mernissi (1996) has pointed out. This consideration is critical to understanding women's cultural location in the nation. In this regard, Meunier's observation concerning the significance of culture and its weight on educational reforms is very important:

Culture [my emphasis] as a collective identity is historically produced. It undergoes continuous change in time and space depending on the interests and functions it fulfills in the moment. This is often manifested through political conflicts in society. Thus, culture is a 'reservoir' of practices and representations which are exploited by social agents in their aim to (re)negotiate their identity. Thus, society is constantly refashioning itself in order to survive. (Meunier, 1997: 14)

In line with Meunier's powerful remarks, I will show in the remainder of this paper how Niger's indigenous traditions, Islamic heritage and the Western legacy have contributed to shaping women's orality/literacy and educational experiences in the country. Furthermore, I will show that Nigerien women also use their understanding of the multiple levels of patriarchal hegemony over national policies and resources to (re)create orality/literacy and educational possibilities for themselves in a way that often subverts the order of things as envisioned by the status quo.

3. Gender, Islam and Literacy in the Colonial and Postcolonial Dispensations

Before the inception of Islam in the *Sahelian* cultural landscape currently known as Niger Republic in the so-called "Francophone" West Africa, orality played a central role in the lives of people and characterized the majority of the cultures that define the peoples who inhabit the area. The only exceptions were the Tuaregs and Schwa-Arabs who, additionally, had literate traditions. These are *Tifinagh* in Tamajaq language for the Tuaregs and Arabic script for the Schwa Arabs. While among the Tuaregs both men and women can read and write Tifinagh, Tuareg women are more closely associated with the literate use of Tifinagh literacy for the production of classical poetry in Tamajaq language (De Foucauld, Charles 1920, Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1998, Klute 2002 p.c.) and other social purposes such as letter writing.

The legacy of Islam in the Sahel introduced the tradition of literacy in either Arabic language and script or in the indigenized version of the Arabic script called *Ajami*. In recent times, these forms of literacies, but especially the Arabic one, and the practice of female seclusion commonly referred to in Hausa society as *Kuble* (*Kulle*) practiced among the aristocracy, the rich and the middle class of Hausa, Fulani and other Muslim ethnic groups, have become an expression of material well-being as well as cultural Islamic modernity.

Though both legacies have been used by men to keep Muslim women in "their place" -- a condition that was latter reinforced by the patriarchal policies of French colonial rule -- the women themselves have not always been passive recipients of all the ideological values attached to this dual heritage. At specific historical junctures, some of the women made use of new openings of the political and cultural space, as in the democratization era of the 1990s, to transform the received traditions of literacy and *Kuble* and inscribe women's religious voices in the public arena, in their multi-farious expressions -- ranging from strong allegiance and conservatism to more liberal interpretations of the meaning of Islam in their lives.

In the 1990s Nigerien women of the urban settings who had limited access to French literacy began to invade the religious space of Islam by participating in an unprecedented manner in and sponsoring themselves to neighborhood Madarasa run bilingually in Arabic and regional lingua franca –Hausa and Zarma. In other cases, Arabic and French languages are used in the middle class French-educated women’s Madarasa run on weekends to accommodate their work schedule. These new women’s Madarasas function differently from the French-Arabic Madarasa school system, commonly known as the Franco-Arab Medersa and intended for the education of children in a curricular program prescribed by the Ministry of Education (Meunier 1997).

At the local mosques, multilingualism involving one’s mother-tongue and one or two regional lingua franca –Hausa and Zarma in Niamey and Dosso -- with Arabic as the sacred language of religious rituals conveyed to non-Arabic speaking devotees through translation in the regional lingua-franca is common place and necessary, especially for Muslim women who for the most part have limited knowledge of Arabic and Islamic texts.

Furthermore, in urban households in Niamey where I conducted my research, multilingualism and code-switching in the local lingua franca define people, especially women’s interactions depending on the class and educational background of the residents,. This is the case even at workplaces (post office, hospital and other government offices) given that less than 12% of the Nigerien population is competent and literate in French.

Given the above picture, multilingualism and code-switching between linguistic media are trans-ethno-regional and trans-class assets rather than an impediment to communication, especially for Muslim women in Niger. In other words, multilingualism and code-switching represent a natural lingua franca for Muslim women who are still disadvantaged in French mainstream educational and workplace settings.

4.1 Muslim Multilingualism, Code-Switching and Hybrid Literacies: A Biographical Sketch

Although I conducted more than 200 interviews with women attending the new Madarasa and other Muslim women during my fieldwork in Niamey, given the space limitation, I provide below a discourse analysis of my conversation with only one of the participants whose account of her educational trajectory leading to her linguistic choices shows a great deal of similarities with a number of the interviewees. This is Habsu Garba, a leading female performing artist in Niger. At the same time, the analysis demonstrates how Habsu Garba uses her agency to craft, in spite of her limited confidence in French language and literacy, a life of achievement by creatively exploiting her multilingualism in both Hausa and Zarma, the two lingua franca in Niamey, in her performances.

Habsu’s introductory remarks at the beginning of our first interview offer *a vignette* for starting the deconstruction of the subtexts underlying her cultural location. She begins by drawing my attention to the fact that the language of our dialogue should not be taken for granted, and how crucial it is for the two of us to agree from the very beginning our language or languages of discussion. This clearly signifies the critical place and role language(s) play in defining how meaning is negotiated and processed in field research by both the researcher and the subject(s) of research. That is why the following opening of our interview acquires great importance.

HG: Let me begin with my birthday...by the way you know our French is not that strong...[laughs...] ...so can we do it in Hausa or Zarma because I express myself better in those...[laughs...]

OA: Of course, we can use any of the languages that come naturally to us during the interview....[laughs...] We always do this going back and forth with languages here [laughs]...It is the natural thing here.... This is natural and it is fine for the interview. Please use whatever comes naturally to you and I will do the same as we are doing now my dear...

In the surface of her statement, Habsu Garba is making a linguistic preference based on a self-perceived limitation in her French language proficiency. Above and beyond this dimension of linguistic competence, there are several layers of interconnected implications. First, the negotiation on the language of interview between Habsu, the subject of my research, and I, the researcher who is also a woman from Niger, challenges up front the notion of “native essentialism” that too readily assumes our “commonality,” including linguistic location in the “common” cultural space. For, Habsu the act

of linguistic negotiation here regarding the choice of language(s) of our interaction, highlights the relevance of her subjectivity as subject of research in the construction of meaning about her life history.

Although educated in the French language, the official language of the country, Habsu Garba elected not to use it as the medium for discussing her life history. Given her knowledge of my educational and linguistic background as someone who grew up in the same cities like herself, Habsu was seeking to preempt possible French linguistic hegemony that I may inadvertently imposed on the process. Instead she proposed Hausa and Zarma, our two mutual mother-tongues, which also happen to be the two dominant national *lingua francas* in Niamey.

Methodologically, therefore, the issue has arisen of the power of the research subject not only to determine her own location in the interview process, but also the location – here a linguistic one – of the researcher. Habsu Garba clearly signifies that meaning about her life will be framed not only outside monolingualism in French or in one local language, but rather through polyglossia (fluency in multiple languages), in this case, in Hausa and Zarma languages. I use ‘polyglossia’ rather than ‘bilingualism’ because, even though Habsu specified Hausa and Zarma only, French did come up here and there in some passages in the course of our numerous interviews. We were thus forced to occupy a negotiated and negotiating space between three languages.

At the heart of the matter then, Habsu Garba’s attempt to shift the linguistic terrain of conversation, illustrates an aspect of how the dynamic of power relations between the researcher and the researched is mediated sensitively in order to create adequate conditions for the voice of the “subaltern” to be expressed more freely (Foucault 1980, Spivak 1988). And some of the methodological questions posed by the issue of languages (especially if polyglossia is involved) used by research subject(s) include the following: a) What are the limits of mediating subjects’ articulation of their subjectivities through translation, especially when this involves translators/interpreters working for a researcher who alter meaning, sometimes inadvertently, and other times consciously, for whatever reasons, especially when the topic of the research is considered sensitive, like the “woman question” in non-western societies? b) Are the meanings emerging out of polyglossia (multiple languages or multiple voices) sufficiently synthesized in whatever theoretical framework in producing the final text of the research?

Equally significant is the role of language in the (re)production, exercise, and maintainance of power in Francophone Africa, in general, and more particularly in Niger Republic across and within gender. Following, Foucault (1980), Kress (1997) and Gee (1995), I would argue that what is Habsu Garba’s underlying concern about our choice of language of interview, is the subjectivity of women about the discursive social meanings associated with language policies and practices in Niger Republic. That interplay between power and the discursive social practices in language is the focus of Gee’s notion of “Discourse” with capital “D”. Discourse, in Gee’s formulation, relates to patterns of using [and choosing] language(s) in social interactions and in contexts of power (Foucault 1980) to (re)construct, recognize, negotiate and contest meaning. While language practices conveyed in local national languages, such as Hausa and Zarma, carry less power in “formal” settings –such as in an interview situation -- it reflects high, if not the highest value conveyed in French, the official language of the country. This is a Discourse that Habsu Garba inadvertently interrogates.

Moreover, Habsu’s linguistic choice problematizes the issue of French language policy in education in the so-called “Francophone” African countries, in general, and in relation to women in the dialectics of power and education more particularly. First, our in Habsu’s phrase “our French” carries with it a paradoxical collective relational intimacy to the French language (and maybe to French culture and people) by virtue of the Francophone identity label as applied to Nigeriens in general. In spite of this presumed Frenchness of the nation, Habsu regards herself as ill-prepared to function adequately in the society with that language. Here lie important questions about the entire French language edifice in the educational system of the country.

Entire volumes of scholarship in psycholinguistics have been produced on the problematics of the teaching of French in Francophone Africa. The work of Professor Sido Issa provides a critical appraisal of the didactic weaknesses of the French curriculum in Niger (Siddo Issa 1982). *Problématique de l’Enseignement du Français en Afrique* was a title of a required course for the students majoring linguistics and/or French at the then University de Niamey. The rationale for this

general requirement is to produce a team of linguists and French pedagogues who could develop national language pedagogical materials that will serve as a bridge to the learning of French language in the curriculum and as future teachers of French as a foreign language rather than as a mother-tongue as it used to be taught in the past.

Habsu's usage of the possessive adjective our in the phrase "Our French" also raises the issue of a shared collective consciousness that vertically defined the educated *élite* in "Francophone" Africa. Thus, the ambiguous semantics of "our French" could underlie class ideology (Fairclough 1989, Warren 1988)³ which sets a hierarchical class divide between the small category of Nigeriens who had access to formal modern school inherited from the French colonial legacy and the largest group of Nigeriens who have benefited neither from the formal education nor literacy in the French language (Djité 1991, 1990 and 1987, Moumouni 1964/8 and Hamani 2000).

Furthermore, there is also the problem of distance between the majority of those educated (men and women) who are defined by an early drop out from the formal educational track (to which Habsu Garba, the subject of the research, belongs) and the tiniest minority of those who have managed to make it beyond the usual "expected" drop out point, especially for women (among whom I, the researcher, working now in a major US university, belongs). According to Abdou Hamani, in a cycle of six years of primary school, the drop out rate of students from the mainstream educational system dangerously amounts to 51.82% (Hamani 2000: 140). Moreover, within this figure that cuts across gender, exists another internal split between an extremely tiny ratio of privileged French educated Nigerien women and an overwhelming category of primary (and secondary) school female dropouts. This latter group of women is often referred to as *panthers blessées* (wounded panthers or wildcat) by chauvinist male.

The sarcastic tone of Habsu Garba's phrase "our French" is a bitter reminder of how the French language is still a foreign language which was used during the colonial time to divide and conquer various indigenous groups. The French language in Francophone Africa, in general and in Niger, in particular, represents the reminiscent traces of that spirit of divisiveness installed by the former colonial master, France. And as a language used for exclusion and divide, the French language could not be, for many colonized subjects who have not developed a complex for their mother tongue(s), the language shaping intimate exploration of questions linked to one's identity.

I personally read Habsu Garba's request as, first, a reminder of the complicity of both French colonial patriarchs and the local patriarchs in denying Nigerien women access to both French language and formal education as well as the extension and reproduction of the same colonial policies in the postcolonial dispensation. Secondly, it expressed a need for both of us to come to a resisting linguistic solidarity as women emerging from that common legacy. From the way my first interview began with Habsu Garba, I was quite pleasantly met with the situation of exploring the potential that the research subject's subjectivity also often influences the entire "gaze of the fieldwork" –if the researcher is sufficiently disposed to observe and be inclusive of this dialectic. Habsu Garba's act set the tone that she too must find the space in this process of engagement to add a dimension to the exploration of life histories of Nigerien women, perhaps to give the researcher a taste of her "own medicine" so to speak while reminding me that I too is Nigerien: What about the researcher's, who is also a Nigerien woman, own educational trajectory in postcolonial called Niger as well as in the USA where English, the dominant global language is the main lingua franca and language of international socio-economic mobility?

Habsu Garba's intervention raises, once again the place of language in the construction of knowledge in the process of studying "African realities". The produced knowledge about/on Africa is often a product of a mediated translation in the official metropole languages –English for "Anglophone" Africa, French for "Francophone" Africa, Portuguese for "Lusophone" Africa—a point that Habsu Garba tried to avoid during my fieldwork. As Ngugi observed during a lecture at Cambridge University:

Take the status of scholarship on Africa. Quite frankly there is nothing so contradictory in African scholarship today in Africa and in the wider world than the position of expert on African realities who do not have to demonstrate even the slightest acquaintance with

an African language. Have you heard, for instance, of a Professor of French at a French university or any other place who did not know a word of French? (Ngugi 1998: 93)

More recently, Achille Mbembe makes a similar observation about “Africanist” social scientists who, because of their concern more with social engineering than with comprehending the “political” and its bearing on the aesthetics of African socio-economic lives, care less about fieldwork and even less about the relevance of mastering African languages in studying and researching Africa and producing knowledge on it:

It should be noted, as far as fieldwork is concerned, that there is less and less. Knowledge of local [African] languages, vital to any theoretical and philosophical understanding, is deemed unnecessary. To judge from recent academic output, sub-Saharan Africa, wrapped in a cloak of impenetrability, has become the black hole of reason, the pit where its powerlessness rest unveiled... (Mbembe, 2001: 7-9)

Both Ngugi and Mbembe are affirming the centrality of language in ways of seeing and (re)presenting the experience that is being studied.

My life as a Nigerien woman researcher working as an immigrant scholar in the United States of America which, a great extent is determined by my “making it through the French (Francophone) educational system” and my current negotiation of my way as a “Muslim Francophone” within an “Anglophone” American academy. Between Habsu Garba and I is a gap that is illustrative of the various levels of unequal commonalities among women in Niger. This divide, precipitated partly by the inadequacy of the adopted French educational system, certainly necessitates a mediation/negotiation of power relations between Habsu Garba, the subject of my research whose subjectivity I am exploring in my capacity as a researcher who is a native-other or an insider- outsider. My experiences at “home”, therefore, present some of the complexities tied to the interplay between identity (privileged native-other), fieldwork and feminist theorizing and praxis that Jayati Lal (1999) incisively discussed in an article entitled “Situating Locations: The Politics of Self, Identity and “Other” in Living and Writing the Texts.” Reading Lal’s article before, during and now in the process of writing this paper, has been more than a helpful “reality check” in challenging some of my assumptions about “insiderness,” while simultaneously resisting the inclination potentially excessive use of “otherness”.

To sum up, then, the many implications that arise from Habsu Garba’s phrase “our French” suggests a set of class power relations among Nigeriens, in general, and more sharply among women. It is, perhaps, this dialectics of power relations between two women sharing a common citizenship, but socially situated in different locations in the same national map, that Habsu Garba was very conscious about and quick to address up front. Habsu Garba’s intervention in this terrain of often unspoken class power relations entailed in the selection of language of interaction and my understanding and accommodation of her request, created, perhaps, some space for both of us to negotiate the terms of transcending, at least for a short while, our point of difference in order to enter into a dialogue, rather than a one way inquiry, into the “subaltern” life journey (Spivak 1988, Mohanty 1991 and Valerie Smith 1997).

4.2 *Habsu Garba and Educational Brassage*

Until today the French language is still acquired primarily through the school system throughout Francophone Africa. The higher the level of education, the greater one’s proficiency is likely to be. Habsu Garba’s declared discomfort with the language, therefore, naturally led me to inquire about her educational background. Our dialogue continued to unfold.

OA: Did you attend school at all?

HG: Yes, I did attend *école* [that is, the mainstream school run in French] up to CM1 [fifth grade]....

OA: What type of school did you attend?

HG: From CI to CM1 [first grade to fifth grade], I attended the regular *école*. After that I attended the *Arabic* school for three years. After the three years, my parents wanted to force me to get married. I refused and I told them that I would rather return to a private school run in

French, *École L’Air*. I was enrolled there for the CM2 [sixth grade]. After the CM2, I passed the typing examination at *École Mission Catholique*. I attended that school for two years and obtained my typing certificate. After that training, I worked for ten years at BIAO Bank. At some point, BIAO began to ask its employees to seek for voluntary early retirement. I left BIAO in 1989 without agreeing to the terms of our termination of service. But I was already involved in my other activities by then...

What emerges from the above answer from Habsu Garba is a taxonomy of the various educational tracks that exist in urban landscapes in Niger Republic, as previously discussed in the first part of this paper. There is her experience in a) *école*, the French inherited school system; (b) the *Madarassa*, a product of Arab-Islamic influence in Niger, and finally c) vocational training for women –offering secretarial skills --introduced by the French Catholic missionaries. This overlapping of educational systems reflects, once more, the concept of *Brassage* (blending) in the realm of education, combining the secular and the religious. Within the religious, furthermore, we see the workings of a syncretism at the cultural level, if not, at the confessional level. In other words, the interaction between Islamic – *Madarassa* -- and French-Christian values shape the cultural identity of Nigeriens through the multi-varied structures of the educational system of the country. And, mediating between these new religious and secular forces, is the continuing influence of indigenous traditions borne out of processes of socialization outside the formal structures of the classrooms.

Here again, Habsu Garba’s ties to *Madarassa* exposes a dimension of her life that brings back the question of language vis-à-vis education in Niger. For the very notion of *Madarassa* in Niger entails the centering of the Arabic language, rather than French, as medium of instruction. In this system, the French language is taught more as a subject, although by the fourth grade it begins to acquire an equal status with Arabic in some schools. Because of the strong “francophilia,” the French complex, however, the Arabic language continued to be regarded as inferior in educational status as compared to French; and Nigeriens trained in the bilingual modern of Arabic-French bilingual French track remained relatively disadvantaged with regard to employment and advanced educational opportunities. Before the new wave of Islamic revivalism known as *Izala* that revalorises Nigerien Islamic identity partly through exposure to knowledge of Arabic language and the Qur’an (Grégoire, H. 1992, Brenner 1993, Meunier, Olivier 1997 and Masquelier, Adeline 2001), therefore, many Nigeriens used to shy away from admitting that they had attended *Madarassa* for fear of being reduced to *marabouts* (mystic teachers) by fellow Nigeriens educated solely in the French mainstream.

4.3 Habsu Garba: Between Modern Education and Indigenous Tradition

Regardless of this situation of diglossia between Arabic and the French language – i.e. the functional distributional between the two languages in which, one, French, is regarded more highly in status than the other, Arabic -- what is important for our understanding of Habsu Garba’s life history, is that the *Madarassa* was the school she ran to as a child trying to escape the elitist French mainstream school that was not meeting her aspirations to sing. As she put it:

HG: ...The mainstream school in French was boring to me and I was very interested in singing. Singing as I used to hear it when passing by the *Madarassa* on my way to or back from *école* was more attractive to me. So, I convinced myself to switch to *Madarassa* without telling my parents. I went where pupils sing! That to me must be my kind of school. So, I dropped out of *école* at CM1 [fifth grade] and joined *Madarassa* for three years.

When my parents realized what I did, they decided to marry me off. I protested and let them know that I would prefer to return to *école*. That is when my father decided to send me to the private school I mentioned earlier. I kept begging my father until he agreed to send me back to school. At that time the school fees were 1500CFA [about \$3.00, USA] per month. I was not successful the first year I took the primary school certificate exam in 1977. Thus, the same year I took the typing examination at the Catholic mission school and passed.

OA: ...Earlier you mentioned that you spent 3 years in *Arabic* school. Is it the *Qur’anic* school or the bilingual French-Arabic *Madarassa*?

HG: It was the bilingual Islamic school French-Arabic school, where the students learn Arabic. Of course, I realized it was not about learning how to sing once I enrolled [laughs..] I did not learn how to sing there as I thought I would [laughs...] But I stayed hooked to singing and there was some singing which was the recitation of the *Qur'an*. I used to listen to that a lot and it made me run away from the mainstream school. The French-Arabic school used to run until 1pm, so I stayed behind to listen to their singing while my young friends joined their parents [laughs..] That was childhood. I told my friend I could not stay in a school (the mainstream school run in French only) where I receive corporal punishment every day. I am switching to a more exciting school! So, I dropped out without my parents' knowledge and joined the bilingual Islamic French-Arabic *Madarassa*. My parents found that much later, almost toward the end of the year. They went to look for my report card because I was not bringing any from my school and they found out that I had opted for a different educational track on my own. I told them I wasn't going to be married off to a wealthy trader.

Habsu Garba's unilateral decision to enroll in *Madarassa* as a child without provoking the concern of her *école's* teacher nor her parents' awareness reflects the symptomatic unconnectedness between *école* and the lives of most Nigeriens including the teachers of that system. In 1968, four years after Niger Republic became independent and around the time of Habsu Garba's struggles in primary school, Abdou Moumouni diagnosed the inherent structural problems of "Francophone" education as follows:

...everyone agrees sincerely or hypocritically in recognizing that rapid training of cadres on all levels and in every specialty, accelerated extension of schooling for children and literacy campaigns among the adult population, are all vital imperatives inseparable from any real progress in our countries. The inadequacy of the educational system inherited from the colonial era, in its conception, orientation, structure and content is at time vaguely realized, at times explicitly recognized and expressed... (Moumouni, 1964/8: 12)

École might be, from the point of view of Habsu's parents, a temporary engagement while awaiting the "right" husband for their daughter. After all, it is very common that traditional patriarchal parents construct a view of womanhood for their daughters whose identities are framed through everlasting state of minorhood, wifehood and mothering. While it is true that many women in Niger appear to live in conformity with patriarchal rules of behavior and sex roles defined by their traditional cultures, there are some like Habsu Garba, Malama Aishatu and many others (Alidou 2005), whose life histories clearly suggest heterogeneity –resisting, living through ambiguity and outright contestating or split affinities-- of responses to the status quo.

From the above quoted passage, we see that Habsu resisted to be one of those women drop-out from formal school as a result of early marriage as discussed in many studies focusing on women's education in Niger. Indeed, Habsu had bargained her way out of being prematurely married to a wealthy man. Such a marriage was her parents way to assure her a life of security as a female who voluntarily dropped out of the new security path arising from the colonial and postcolonial dispensation, the path of "limited" formal education in French language that did not meet her artistic aspirations. In short, Habsu Garba's remarks quoted above demonstrate her rejection of the ascribed patriarchal, colonial framing of her womanhood.

Perhaps, being born in the wake of Niger's independence from French colonization, the seeds of freedom and the desire to craft a "new" notion of independence even at the individual level permeated children's lives, even among the ranks of women to which Habsu Garba belonged. For, at an early stage of her life, Habsu showed a determination to have an active role in shaping the course of her life and acted accordingly, contrary to cultural expectations. These significant characteristics of a Muslim female child are often overlooked in many academic writings framed in western epistemology about women in Muslim societies. Instead, many of these studies have sought to confirm their theories of the homogeneity of "submissiveness" of (African) Muslim women and their presumed surrender to (local and international) patriarchal order. Consequently, the eyes of the scholars have tended to see mainly those cases that confirm their *a priori* assumptions. Thus, lack of confidence in the French language and limited access to formal education did not prevent Habsu Garba to optimally exploit her multilingualism in Hausa and Zarma and level of literacy in both French and Arabic in her artistic

performance. An excerpt of a political song below which she composed, choreographed and performed with her artistic group called *groupe shock* is a prime illustration of her consciousness of the importance of code-switching between the two lingua franca –Hausa and Zarma – in order to win a larger electoral constituency for the party she is advocating for.

Ranar Hwarin ciki Ranar ZaBe
(Title in Hausa)

(Rejoice on Election Day) –

(in Hausa language)

'yen Niger
Ranar hwarin ciki ce yau
Sai murna
Za mu zab'e yau
Na shugaba

People of Niger
Today is a day of rejoicing
We feel joy
We will be voting
For the president

(switching to Zarma language)

Niger laabiizay
Kuluujan nda farhan hanaa nee kaa
Laabiizay ir ma koy saafee
Ir gin boraa

People of Niger
The day of happiness and rejoicing is here
Citizens let us go and vote for
our leader

(switching back to Hausa language)

'yen k'asar Niger
Sahiyar ga za ta yin kyawo
Da maraice
A ke ganin niyya
Mun tabbata k'asar Niger
Wadata za ta sabkowa
Ni'ima ta lullub'e Niger
Mu ci gaba

People of Niger Republic
This morning will be a pretty one
In the afternoon
We will see what is commitment
We are certain in Niger Republic
(that) it will be filled with bounty
Bounty will cover Niger
So that we move ahead (we progress)

(switching to Zarma language)

Zaari hannaawo
Zaa day ciinii gaa naa goo
Niizeero sikka kuluu sii noo
Suugi nda gwamnii na zuuree
kal zaadayaŋ

This pretty day
It is up to the night
There is no doubt Niger
(is) visited by goodness and plenty
What remains is moving ahead

(switching back to Hausa language)

'yen Kasar Niger
MNSD sabuwar Nassara
Ta yi kira
Mu ba ta yarda mu da ko'ina
'yen k'asar Niger
Bakin tahiya
Ka zo cikin d'aki
Shirin namu
Ga shi ya zamna
Doki ne ram da kayanshi
Wane ne za a ba ragama
Ya tai da shi

Citizens of Niger
MNSD, the new power (leadership),
she is calling
(so) that we give her our trust from everywhere
People of Niger
The end of a journey (lit. walk)
Is for you to get to the place (lit. room)
Our design (planning)
has indeed materialized
It is a ready horse with its ornaments
Whom should we give the lead
for him to compete against

5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how colonial and postcolonial educational and language policies have impacted the lives of Muslim women in Niger Republic, often in ways that disadvantage them immensely to their male counterpart. Elevating French to the status of the most powerful currency of communication in the market of socio-political and economic survival, these policies made French

access to a privileged male minority, in the process generating hegemonic discourses that seek to legitimize the continuation of gendered inequalities in education generally and in the acquisition of crucial literacy and linguistic skills. But, far from allowing this situation to entrap and paralyze them, Muslim women with little access to French continue to respond in creative ways by setting up alternative educational venues through which the monolingual Francocentric orientation of elitism is challenged by a poly-lingual/multilingual mode of intertextuality, especially in the oral domain. The women have been successful in valorizing local languages anew, mobilizing them in trans-ethnic communication through an elaborate system of code-switching. In addition to their use of Latin alphabet, depending on regions, the women are also given renewed emphasis on local literacy tradition including *Tifinagh*, *Ajami* and through their mosque-based educational initiatives in Qur'anic Arabic and local languages.

All these developments in education, language and literacy are products of the pro-democratization momentum that began in the early 1990s. But as much as the democratic struggle has given local languages and literacies a new lease of life so to speak, these local media in turn may contribute to the consolidation of a more enduring democratic tradition in the country.

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