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Reviews



Muslim Women Sing: Hausa Popular Song

BEVERLY MACK

Bloomington and Indianapolis, University of Indiana Press, 2004
302 pp. (with CD), ISBN 0-25321729-6 (\$27.95)

Beverley Mack's research on Hausa Muslim women continues with this study of women engaged in popular music. She has previously published systematic studies of a prolific 19th-century Islamic poet and teacher, in *The Collected Works of Nana Asma'u, Daughter of Usman dan Fodiyo, 1793–1864* (Michigan State University Press, 1997), co-edited with Jean Boyd, and *One Woman's Jihad*, also co-authored with Boyd (Indiana University Press, 2000). Other Hausa women's more secular jihad was covered in *Hausa Women in the 20th Century* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) co-edited with Catherine M. Coles.

Mack embarked on this research in 1979, when she travelled in Kano (the heart of Muslim northern Nigeria) to record and analyse Hausa women's poetry. The outcome was her doctoral dissertation *Wakokin Mata: Hausa Women's Oral Poetry*, (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1981), and an edited volume of Hausa-language poetry, *Alkalami a Hannun Mata* (A pen in the hands of women), by Hauwa Gwaram and

Hajiya ‘Yar Shehu (Northern Nigerian Publishing Company, Zaria, 1983). These two poets are a significant analytical focus of the present book.

The study of music itself among the Hausa is fascinating in that music and musical activity are accorded a low social status among the conservative Muslim societies of northern Nigeria. Even the use of the *bandir* frame drum to accompany Sufi mystic chants continues to generate controversy about the role of musical instruments in a Hausa Muslim polity. Women engaged in music in these circumstances therefore present a double anomaly, given their “hidden” existence as women not partaking in public discourse of popular culture in Muslim societies.

The thematic focus of this study is what the author sees as the public exclusion of women from the sphere of popular culture in a conservative African Muslim society. It chronicles attempts by seven Muslim Hausa women performance artists to break the cultural barrier and engage in the creative pursuits at which they excel. Specifically, the book builds on Mack’s earlier anthology by exploring in English the poetry of Hajiya Hauwa Gwaram and Hajiya ‘Yar Shehu, with passing references to other popular artistes. Of the 35 poems and songs that are analysed and transcribed in the book (and included on the CD), 24 are by Gwaram, seven by ‘Yar Shehu and one each by Binta Katsina, Barmani Choge, Maizargadi and Mai Duala.

The artistes covered fall into three broad categories. The first, and seemingly the most revered by Mack, are poets who recite their poetry written in Roman script without any musical accompaniment, here represented by Gwaram and ‘Yar Shehu. In Mack’s analysis, these artistes are literate because they actually write and recite their poems, either at poetry circles or on radio programmes. Thus the benefits of Western education – which these two had, in contrast with the other “illiterate” artistes – are touted as an artistic route to a more highbrow creative activity.

The second category contains two praise singers – Maizargadi and Mai Duala – who were attached to the Emir’s palaces in Kano and Ningi where Mack conducted fieldwork. No attempt is made here to explore this genre; rather these two artistes – each in her sixties when the fieldwork was done – are used as sole representatives of the genre of patronage music among the Hausa.

The third category is the more popular musician in the public sphere, accessible to anyone. The artistes covered here include Hajiya Faji, Binta Katsina and Barmani Choge. A surprising omission is the prominent performer Uwaliya Mai Amada (who was still alive during Mack’s fieldwork), the quintessential Hausa female artiste targeted at “mature” audiences. With her raucous and bawdy dance routines, Uwaliya cut an unlikely figure as a Muslim woman during her performances.

A focus on the performance style of the women profiled seemingly overlooks one fundamental fact – all the women profiled are “mature”. Choge was the youngest at 35, followed by Gwaram at 40; the others were over 50. Consequently, their engagement in the public sphere of Hausa entertainment, whether for gendered or mixed audiences, acknowledges the physical characteristic of being past their prime, and therefore not a threat to “public morality”. Even the gaudy and often sexually suggestive routines of Choge are acceptable for an “old woman”, who does not pose

the threat of sexually attracting anyone, and provide a mild entertainment for both male and female audiences.

In her analysis of the social functions of Hausa women's creativity (Chapter 5), Mack uses Gwaram's poetry repertoire as a template in determining the artistic interpretations of social life among the Hausa from 1966 to 1980. She weaves a sweeping tapestry of social transformation embroidered with glints of Gwaram's poetry to capture events (such as participation in politics) and processes (such as king lists of Fulani emirs in Kano). She contrasts Gwaram's more structured written messages about the importance of civil duty and responsibility with the bawdy performance of Choge, appearing with a calabash orchestra at the local university. She describes Choge's performance – "which turns education into satire" (p. 85) – as appealing to the base instincts of the students who were enjoying the show.

Mack suggests not only less elegance in oral performing artistes, but also less Islam. As she says of her recording (included on the CD) of Choge's university performance:

In thematic contrast, Choge... provides a platform for satiric rebuttal to Hauwa Gwaram's highly moralistic views on education... Her performance opens with a brief doxology praising God, followed by praise to *Inna*. While *inna* is a common term for mother, it is also (along with *iya*) a name for the principal figure of the pre-Islamic *bori* cult. Thus, Choge's arrangement begins with the irreverent juxtapositions of both God and non-Islamic possession cult goddesses, setting the tone for her performance. (p. 84)

There are some problems with this interpretation. Closer examination of the lyrics reveals nothing to suggest that the word *inna* refers to the Hausa *bori* cult figure rather than to its more common referents of a mother or a female mentor (Mack provides her own translation of only the first two lines of these lyrics on page 110):

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| 1 | Kuma Allah Kadiran, Mamaridan
(wa Muridan), | (Also) Allah, the Powerful
(<i>Kadiran</i>), Who does what He intends (<i>Muridan</i>) |
| 2 | Sarkin rufin asiri, madaama. | He who makes us contented, Eternal One
(<i>Maadama</i>)!! |
| 3 | Ayye, Assalamu alaykum <i>mata na inna</i>
masu abin bamu. | Oh, Peace be on you,
companions to the <i>woman of substance</i> (<i>inna</i>)
who lavishes gifts on us |

Bori cultists do not associate their activities with Allah, quite simply because they do not believe in His existence. Allah and bori figure references simply could not coexist in the Hausa linguistic universe. Choge's heavy dosage of Islamic religious symbols affirming Tauheed (the oneness of Allah) belies any analysis in terms of reference to bori cultism in her lyrics. Finally, the sentence containing *Inna* clearly refers to the generous women mentors who bestow lavish gifts on the singer. This song, "Dare Alherin Allah" ("Night is Allah's favour"), opens all Choge's performances, and is usually dedicated to Mariya Sunusi Dangwate, a Kano female philanthropist who strongly empowers women performing artists. There is no other place in the

performance where the word *inna* appears in Choge's lyrics, so it is inappropriate to connect the use of *inna* in this verse to bori cult *inna*.

Mack's interpretation of juxtaposition, based on one line in Choge's performance, appears elsewhere when she notes "when they are part of *bori* performance, the orally composed songs juxtapose reference to God with reference to spirits and requests for money" (p. 80). This again gives the impression that Hausa women oral composers are less religious in their beliefs and performances than written poets. There are no further examples from her other oral subjects to strengthen this hypothesis.

True enough, Barmani Choge does conduct a bawdy and often sexually suggestive performance. Yet her catalogue includes structured oral prose aimed at addressing the social functions of Hausa woman's creativity. In her song "A Kama Sana'a Mata" ("Women, be gainfully employed"), she lists a series of gainful economic activities in which Hausa housewives can engage, even if they are in *purdah*. "Sakarai Ba Ta Da Wayo" ("Foolish, she is not wise") describes three co-wives in a household, pointing out the gainful employment of two, and the lazy life-style of the third. Yet these strong social messages are not captured by Mack as a reflection of social responsibility of the oral performer in Hausa Muslim society.

In considering poetry as a social teaching device, Mack focuses on Gwaram's poetry, with little textual analysis of other artistes' repertoire, and, again, with historical and political poems her main focus is on Gwaram's and 'Yar Shehu's poetic rendition of the lives of famous northern Nigerians such as Sir Ahmadu Bello (the Sardaunan Sakkwato), and the late General Murtala Muhammad. Mack suggests that this drew "direct links between religious and political authority in the north" (p. 93). I doubt if this link has been sufficiently proved in just few verses of two poets. Missing here is the more popular eulogy for General Murtala Muhammad by Uwaliya Mai Amada, which was one of the few vinyl recordings of the artiste by EMI (Nigeria). Not only is the latter message of patriotism and hero worship in the public sphere, but it also displays Uwaliya's excellent poetic rendition of the Hausa language. The choral refrain of "lailahaillah" (there is no god but Allah) that accompanies the song provides a perfect rhythm to the sepulchral oral poetry.

Mack concludes that "praise songs and poems composed by contemporary Hausa women reflect a pervasive concern for literary and the religious and social obligations of the devout Muslim, especially women" (p. 97). This is an interesting generalization from the analysis of two poets (Gwaram, 'Yar Shehu) and two praise singers (Maizargadi and Mai Duala). Of the 35 poetic works covered, only three had a focus on women. The praise singers had the Emir of Kano as their subject matter, not female empowerment or even queens and other palace women. The remaining texts do not seem to reflect revolutionary concern about literacy and religion as they specifically affect women.

Mack paints a very sensitive, sympathetic, awed (although not condescending) portrait of the seven Hausa women she encountered, but is limited by her fascination with two of them, Gwaram and 'Yar Shehu. Fine poets as they are, their poetic renditions have been elitist; Gwaram, for example, recited at the exclusive Hikima

Club, a male-dominated group of northern Nigerian intellectuals in the 1960s. This restricts Mack's exploration of the creativity of other Hausa women *popular* singers operating in the open public sphere. Considering Mack's focus elsewhere on the religious opus of Nana Asma'u, one would also have expected her coverage of intellectual poets to include Hausa female Islamic scholars who write their poems in *ajami* (Arabic-based Hausa script).

Perhaps it is the title of the book that is deceptive, for it suggests a sustained study of popular music among Hausa women and of Muslim issues as they affect them. Mack's study is restricted in its number of subjects, and comes about 24 years after the fieldwork. Mack had access to later research, especially Graham Furniss's excellent *Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture in Hausa* (Smithsonian, 1996), as well as the chance to go back to the field in 2002 to review data. Perceptions of music in the society where Mack conducted her field research in 1980 have changed. By the 1990s, media globalization had violently intruded into the staid laid-back musical genres of the 1980s, and led to the emergence of a whole retinue of women vocalists, lyricists and song writers – all young, mainly unmarried, nubile and flaunting it, and in direct collision with the traditional Hausa religious institutions of Hisbah (moral police), A Daidaita Sahu (societal re-orientation programme) and Shari'a. There are also new musical forms (Hausa rap, Hausa soundtrack music, increasing use of female voices in musical forms over the radio) with Yamaha soft synthesizer replacing the *garaya*, *goge* and *kukuma*. The transnational flow of goods, ideas and media into Hausa societies have combined to redefine perceptions of music among modern Hausa, but are not within the scope of this book.

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Sounds of Change: Social and Political Features of Music in Africa

STIG MAGNUS THORSEN (ed.)

Stockholm, Sida Studies, 2004

220 pp. (with CD), ISBN 91-586-8415-8

In its exclusive focus on modern musical traditions *Sounds of Change* aligns with the growing scholarly interest in the phenomenon of musical change in Africa. The increased privileging of diachronic processes in music was one of the significant developments in ethnomusicology towards the end of the 20th century. Earlier in that century, pioneer ethnomusicologists like Alan Merriam and Bruno Nettl had set the premise for the study of musical change and acculturation. Merriam, in his *Anthropology of Music* (1964, 306), observed that internally ordered changes were less dramatic than externally generated ones, while Nettl, in *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty Nine Issues* (1983), distinguished between the process of