

# Tribute to Hajiya Sa'adatu Ahmad Barmani Choge, Griotte, northern Nigeria, 1948-2013

Abdalla Uba Adamu

Bayero University, Kano

It is rare in traditional African Muslim communities to find traditional women performers in the public domain. Hajiya Sa'adatu Aliyu (with Maimuna Barmani Choge as stage names)

Barmani Choge's performances appeal typically to mature women in high society because of her daring and often experimental exploration of issues that other conventional women singers avoid.

brokethebarriersofpublicspace for women's entertainment in the traditionally conservative Muslim societies of northern Nigeria.

Barmani Choge was a Griotte<sup>1</sup> in the tradition of African female



Late Hajiya Sa'adatu Barmani Choge, 26 December, 2007, Funtuwa, northern Nigeria.

vocalists who seem to be neglected in the current age of female Afropop as popularized by African women singers such as Oumou Sangare, Kandia Kouyaté, Yandé Codou, and Madina N'Diaye. As Hale noted, "these female wordsmiths sing songs of praise and advice, serve as intermediaries in delicate interpersonal negotiations, and articulate the values of society at major social events."<sup>2</sup> Barmani Choge's articulation was for women's issues, ranging from sexuality to becoming involved in a business while holding down the fort in purdah.

The genre of her music was *Amada*, a form of music traditionally performed by mature women, based on the Muslim *qasida* (poem) pattern. Although she was the most visibly popular performer of this genre until her death, she had a precedent in the late Hajiya Uwaliya Mai Amada (1934-83). *Amada* started as an Islamic religious performance by women in their inner apartments, before becoming secularized later, in public performances. Barmani Choge's performances

appeal typically to mature women in high society because of her daring and often experimental exploration of issues that other conventional women singers avoid. Her performances were usually private affairs targeted at women and took place mostly at women-themed events, such as weddings and naming ceremonies throughout northern Nigeria. However, as she was unique in providing a traditional performance, she was often invited to public performances involving mixed-gender audiences. She had also occasionally acknowledged the generosity of individual notable male patrons in her songs.

Her all-female band would play with calabash bowls of various sizes, faced down on the floor; one would be faced down in a large plastic bowl of water giving a 'bass' sound, while the others give out a dry cracking sound when struck. The players use the edge of their palms to hit the calabashes while at the same time lifting the calabash bowls and bringing them down on the floor to increase the loudness of their sound. The women also form the chorus, repeating a line which is usually the title of the song. Their performance is therefore call-and-response. This mode of performance, which is very African, ensures immersive participation of all members of the group in any performance.

The thematic focus of her performances was on the sociology of the family as it affects the woman in a typical Muslim Hausa household. She used her lyrical power to draw attention to issues dealing with inter-personal relationships between women and between women and men. Much of her repertoire dealt with female social and economic empowerment in a traditional setting. For instance, her song, *Sakarai Ba Ta Da Wayo* (Useless Woman) was a direct attack on women who prefer to live on other women's economic efforts rather than seek out their own means of sustenance. In the song, Barmani admonished women who rely exclusively on their husbands for upkeep.<sup>3</sup>

Her all-female band would play with calabash bowls of various sizes, faced down on the floor; one would be faced down in a large plastic bowl of water giving a 'bass' sound, while the others give out a dry cracking sound when struck.

This song is complemented by *A Kama Sana'a Mata* (Women, Engage in Profitable Occupations),<sup>4</sup> which urges women to be economically empowered. Again, this performance sought to encourage women to be as economically independent as possible, and she outlined a series of home-based economic activities (mainly centered around catering) which women can engage in without violating their Muslim *purdah* status.

Her craft was considered to be *roko* (praise singing), a vocation she was not ashamed of, despite the social stigma attached to being a *maroƙi* (praise singer) in Hausa societies. In fact, she defiantly reaffirmed her pride in her craft in *Choge* (dance step), her anthem, where a few lines read:

*To sai na cewa madoka kwarya/  
C'mon, my calabash drummers/  
Idan kuna wa Allah/  
Please, for the sake of God/  
To sai ku warware hannu/  
Reach out with your hand/  
Ku doki kwarya sosai/  
Really belt out those tunes/  
Sannan ku buɗe baki/  
Open your mouth (for chorus)/  
Wadansu na ba mu kuɗi, wadansu na zagin mu/  
Some shower us with money, while others  
abuse us/  
Ina ruwan wani da wani yo in ba rashin kunya ba/  
Why should I care, you impertinent  
whippersnapper!/  
Ana zama da barawo bare maroƙin baki/  
People get along with thieves, why not praise  
singers?/  
Kuma Allah Ya taimaki mai ba mu ko ya na sata ne/  
May Allah reward whoever gives to us, even if  
they stole it/*

Despite this insouciant attitude towards receiving gifts, Barmani included a moral script in the

same performance by admonishing youth to desist from taking drugs. Thus typical of her lyrical arrangements, a particular song is actually a compound-song, containing many topics, although all are principally centred upon praising individuals. In between the praises of individuals, she injects verses advocating for social issues. This lyrical dynamism means that a particular song could have as many variations as she wanted. For instance, while *Choge* was her main anthem in which she reaffirmed her vocation, versions of the song contain totally different lyrical contents, while maintaining the compositional structure of the original, much in the same way that live bands improvise their studio recordings on stage.

She often looked inwards to the world of women and reserved her barbs for mothers who do not make sufficient arrangements to ensure their daughters are comfortable when they get married. In a way typical of Hausa societies, a woman getting married is accompanied by virtually her entire household's furniture. This custom was designed to make her as materially independent as possible from the husband and also to give her a sense of property ownership. In *A Zage Zogala*,<sup>5</sup> Barmani admonishes mothers who skimp and 'shortchange' their daughters when the latter's wedding takes place.

*Albishirin ku zan yi labarin shegiyar uwa/  
Listen y'all, I am going to talk about the bitchy  
mother/  
Da mai gara da man kadanya da daddawar taro/  
The one who buys cheapest condiments for  
her daughter's pantry/  
Ita ta kwace kudin maraya, ta kai ta gaya/  
She has usurped the girl's inheritance, bereft  
of anything to show/  
To ai mai langa ya yi talla ba ta ce tsaya ba/  
Yet she ignores hawkers selling the wedding*

The thematic focus of her performances was on the sociology of the family as it affects the woman in a typical Muslim Hausa household. She used her lyrical power to draw attention to issues dealing with inter-personal relationships between women and between women and men.

things [her] daughter needs/  
*To kwalla ko kwabo-kwabo ne ba zan saya ba/  
Even if they are dirt cheap, she would not  
buy/  
Da mai tsire sai ya gifta sai ta ce tsaya nan/  
But when a meat seller passes by, she stops  
him/  
Amma ka tsaya ina so in mai da yau na/  
'Wait up, I think this looks tasty'/  
...  
Kuma babu katifa, babu bargo, kuma babu labule/  
No beddings or curtains/  
Kuma babu gadon da ke hadawa mai birge 'yan  
maza/  
No bed of the assembly type which impresses  
men/  
Kai diya ka bida, diya ka ke so, ba gata nan ba/  
'You want a girl, well here she is'/*

In this performance, she switched her point of view from the narrator to the character by using speech forms to speak on behalf of her character. Again typical of traditional Hausa marriages, the new bride is often accompanied to her husband's house with enough foodstuff to fill their pantry. This is to ease the burden of purchasing food items for the newly-weds

for at least six months or more. The assumption is that within this period, the couple would have learnt basic housekeeping strategies to help them economize when they begin to buy their own food items.

Realising that women suppress their sexuality, particularly in public spaces, Barmani often crossed the boundaries by openly advocating for sexual freedom. This is reflected in her *Mai Abin Dadi*<sup>6</sup> (strictly, 'one who possesses that which pleases,' or, 'the delicious one'), an extremely rare song not often played on the radio because of its overt suggestiveness; in that song, she plainly explains the 'delicious' part of a female anatomy:

*Ba don wuri da yara ba, da kun ga kwanciyar fai-  
fai,  
[if not for the children here, I could have  
shown you the spread-eagled pose/  
Ladi, (a bari) sai dare ya yi  
But, Ladi (chorister), let's wait till it's night/  
Ai rannan na ce ma yaran mata, a koyi kwanciyar  
fai-fai/  
I am counselling you to learn the spread-  
eagled pose/  
Sai dare ya yi, da rana ba a kwanciyar fai-fai/  
But save it for the night, you don't do the  
spread-eagle pose during the day/  
Ana ta sabon da, wa ya ke ta tsohon da/  
When a fresh one is here, who would care for  
the old one?/*

The last line in this verse refers to a new wife in a polygamous household. Barmani here celebrates the new bride as having a 'sabon da' using a shortened vulgar Hausa nickname for a particular reproductive part of the female anatomy. The line – and the song – is often interpreted to mean that a fresh woman has arrived, and the existing ones are now stale. Lines such as these, which openly celebrate sexuality of women, are often frowned upon by the Islamicated<sup>7</sup> social culture of northern Nigeria; nevertheless they made Barmani Choge a superstar among traditional women in northern Nigeria, because she expresses their suppressed feelings.

Her other set-pieces include a song that celebrates birth, *Gwarne Ikon Allah*<sup>8</sup> (The Blessings of Children). This is another extremely popular performance, in which she proudly celebrated having a dozen children. The song was a particular favourite at naming ceremonies where Barmani eulogizes the new mother by reminding her that she, the protagonist, has also given birth to children and had set a dozen as her target. As a verse in the song reads:

This is another extremely popular performance, in which she proudly celebrated having a dozen children. The song was a particular favourite at naming ceremonies where Barmani eulogizes the new mother by reminding her that she, the protagonist, has also given birth to children and had set a dozen as her target.

*Ayye ni idan na fara sai nai dozin/  
Once I start, I will only stop when I have  
dozen/  
Ke Ladi in na fara sai nai dozin/  
Yo, Ladi, my target is dozen/  
In yi Sa'a, kuma in yi Sa'adu/  
I will have Sa'a, then Sa'adu/  
In yi Habi (ba), kuma in yi Habibu/  
Then Habiba, and Habibu/  
Sai nai Amiru, sai in yi Hamza/  
Then Amiru, and Hamza/  
In yi Jamila, in yi Jamilu/  
Then Jamila, and Jamilu/  
Na yi Basira, nai Basiru/  
I have Basira, and Basiru/  
Saura Salamatu, saura Sale/  
Remain Salamatu and Saleh/*

From this, we noted that Barmani, at the time of recording the song, already had ten children. She eventually had the other two children, making a total of twelve as she originally intended. Her lyrical power is also evident in the rhyming of the male and female names, where she used vocal sound-alikes in most of the

naming (the exception being Amiru and Hamza).

In a direct attack on women who prefer not to have many children so as not to be 'worn out,' Barmani lyrically chastises these women and proudly proclaims that even after the twelfth child, she can make herself sexually attractive. Thus, she was extremely graphic about this when she sang in a live version of *Gwarne Ikon Allah*;<sup>9</sup>

*Haihuwa malkar faru ce/  
Giving birth to children has its season/  
Ai ran da ta kare sai warisa/  
At the end, behold the lavish party/  
Sai walkami kuma sai zuba hoda/  
I'd dolly up and raring to go/*

*Rigar mama sallamu alaykum/*  
 ‘Welcome back my brassiere’/  
*Zuwa turaka ba na fashi/*  
 I will be a constant visitor to the master  
 bedroom/  
*Kai yaran mata ku yi shagalin ku*  
 ‘So come on girls, party up!’/

Thus expressing her sexuality – ‘walkami’ refers to a woman who is unamenable to discipline – Barmani celebrates both the multiple birth of children, as well as the sexuality of the process in the master bedroom. Aware that the nursing mother (‘majego’) is often seen as messy due to dirty diapers, Barmani throws a barb to accentuate, further, the importance of children in a version of *Gwarne Ikon Allah*;<sup>9</sup>

*Ta Audu an ga daki na duk zawo/*  
 Yo, Ta Audu (player) my room is full of poo  
 and dirty diapers/  
*Mutan gidan duk sun tsane ni/*  
 I am shunned by everyone in the house/  
*Yanzu an ga ‘ya’yana sun murje/*  
 Now my children have grown up fine/  
*Gambo zo kayo min goro,/*  
 ‘Gambo, go and buy kola for me’/  
*Kai ma Hassan zo zan aike ka/* ‘You too, Hassan,  
 run this errand for me’/  
*Ba za a taya mu sayen garwa ba/*  
 No one will assist (in celebrating the birth)/  
*An dame mu da shegen zagi/*  
 And they just kept raining abuses on me  
 (when I gave the birth)/

Lyrical performances like these, often at large women-only gatherings, help to captivate her to her audiences; they see silent reflections of themselves in her bawdy expressiveness. This is reflected in adult-themed performances such as in *Wakar Duwaiwai*<sup>10</sup> or ‘The Song of the Buttocks,’ equivalent to KC and the Sunshine Band’s

This is reflected in adult-themed performances such as in *Wakar Duwaiwai* or ‘The Song of the Buttocks,’ equivalent to KC and the Sunshine Band’s 1976 hit ‘Shake Your Booty.’ Here, she celebrates a woman’s attraction to her matrimonial duties.

1976 hit ‘Shake Your Booty.’ Here, she celebrates a woman’s attraction to her matrimonial duties. However, her most successful song was about resistance to polygamous marriages as sung in *Dare Allah Magani* (also) *Wakar Kishiya*<sup>11</sup> (Allah, the Curer of Night Darkness or the Song of Co-wife). This was not one of her original compositions because other Amada musicians such as Uwaliya had previously recorded it; however, Barmani’s rendition carried a fresh perspective that appealed to more modern Hausa women who took umbrage at the idea of polygamous relationships. As a verse spitefully notes:

*Komai dadinka da kishiya*  
 No matter good a co-wife is to you,  
*Fata take ta ga kofa na rufe*  
 She lives in the hope of seeing your door  
 locked  
*Ko ka mutu ko ko ka tafi*  
 Either you are dead, or you have left the house  
 ...  
*Kai ku tsaya ku ji sunan kishiya*  
 Hang on, let me recite Kishiya’s epithets  
 ‘*Bakar kunama mai halbin tsiya*  
 ‘Black scorpion with deadly sting  
*Bakin maciji mai sarin tsiya*  
 Black snake with poisonous fangs  
*Ta gwandaririya mai karfin gaba*  
 Sexually hyperactive  
 (da) *Mai hakorin cizo shegiya*  
 With biting fangs  
*Idan ta kama sai ta girgiza’*  
 Who twists when she clamps them on you’

After her death in 2013, seven of Barmani’s grandchildren picked up her calabashes and continued her repertoire, which contained both her original compositions and their own. They were led by Zainab Ayuba, the daughter of Asiya (one of the missed names in the list of children in *Gwarne Ikon Allah*).

Hajiya Sa'adatu Aliyu, née Ahmadu, was born in Gwai-Gwayi village in Funtuwa, modern Katsina State, northern Nigeria. She was Fulani, and from an Islamic theologian family; her father, Mallam Ahmadu, was one of the most notable Qur'anic and Islamic

'Choge' was her stage name, and referred to a dance step she introduced - limping her leg while singing the song 'Choge' in which she described a concert at a club in the police barracks in Funtuwa, held for a local notable politician, Dauda Mani, who invited her.

scholars in the Funtuwa region. As was the norm in the 1950s and 1960s, she did not attend any modern formal school but had all her necessary Islamic education under the tutelage of her father in his school, which he operated for other children in the village. At the age of fifteen, she was married to a local young businessman, Alhaji Aliyu, in Funtuwa.

Her singing career started very casually, as she did not set out to become a performer. In 1973, at the age of twenty-eight, she started singing during wedding and naming ceremonies in Funtuwa, purely to entertain herself and fellow guests at the events. She was so good at it that she quickly gained a reputation as a boisterous and uninhibited performer who 'said it like it was,' since she addressed issues intimate to women, about life, wealth, husbands and survival. Apparently, her husband did not object, as long as the performances were at domestic and female-gendered intimate spaces within the private sphere.

Hajiya Sa'adatu and Alhaji Aliyu remained married until his death in 1991. He was thus the father of the twelve children she listed in *Gwarne Ikon Allah*. Sadly, only six remained alive in 2015, although one of the survivors, Basira, also gave birth to twelve children of whom six were male and six were female. Hajiya Sa'adatu remarried in 1995 to Alhaji Bello Kansila, but the marriage lasted only a year. She devoted the rest of her life to her performances and looking after her children.

'Barmani' was a nickname, and was used to refer to a female child who survived after many prior births were stillborn. The survivor is nicknamed 'barmani,' meaning 'leave this

one' (the male equivalent is 'Barau'). 'Choge' was her stage name, and referred to a dance step she introduced - limping her leg while singing the song 'Choge' in which she described a concert at a club in the police barracks in Funtuwa, held for a local notable politician, Dauda

Mani, who invited her. It was during this particular performance that she explained what she meant by 'Choge.' As the verse reads:

*Da ke ta Audu kwana kwarya/  
C'mon Ta Audu, the drummer  
Idan kunawa Allah/  
For cryin' out loud  
Ku yi wo kidan Nagoma direba/  
Belt out Nagoma, the driver's number  
Don shi ne ya sa ni a mota/  
He took me in a car  
(da) Sai ya kai ni Bariki wasa/  
And took me to the Barracks for a concert  
To sai na tad da Dauda Mani/  
I met Dauda Mani  
A kan kujerar karfe/  
Lounging on a metal chair  
Kuma ya sanya rigar leshi/  
Wearing lace gown  
Sannan hannunsa har da agogo/  
His hand adorned by a watch  
Sannan idan sa har da gilashi/  
With spectacles on his face  
Kuma ya dana kube daidai/  
His hat worn at a rakish angle  
Sannan kafarsa ga takalma/  
With shoes on his feet  
Rannan na ce masa, 'Dan Garba mai fararen  
mata'/  
That day, I asked him, 'Dan Garba, the one  
with light-skinned wives,  
Ko ina farar motar ka?'/  
'Where is your white car?'  
(da) Shi ma ya dade da jan biro/  
He been long in the civil service pushing pens*

*Na dade ina Chogawa/  
I have been long in this game doing Choge*

(Side B) Maras Sana'a, Sama Ruwa Kasa Ruwa, Alhazawa (which she refers to as Lallai lallai Mu Mu Na Zuwa).

Her last public performance was in Kaduna, northern Nigeria, on Saturday 15 December 2012. Soon afterwards, she fell sick (she was already suffering from diabetes). She finally died on Saturday 2 March, 2013, in Funtuwa, the city she adopted as her home. She was 68.

Barmani was extremely popular at live performances during women's ceremonies and college students' social functions. She was not on any club circuits as this type of entertainment structure does not exist in Muslim northern Nigeria.

### **Polygram Tape Cover of *Mai Soso Ke Wanka (Only the Privileged Dolly up)***

The fact that the two major record companies in Nigeria recorded Barmani's ten performances, within just three years of each other, reveals the dearth of her catalogue.

### **Availability of Back Catalogue**

Barmani was extremely popular at live performances during women's ceremonies and college students' social functions. She was not on any club circuits as this type of entertainment structure does not exist in Muslim northern Nigeria. Despite her popularity, Barmani was recorded only once and this was by EMI (Nigeria) Ltd (now Ivory Music) which released a tape of her songs titled *Hajiya Barmani Choge & Her Group*. The tape has a catalogue number NEMI (LP) 0483. No date was printed on the cover, and one can only assume that the tape was transferred from a vinyl album master, probably in April 1983, when the writer purchased the tape at a local market in Kano. The picture of Barmani on the cover of the tape is decidedly that of a younger person. Its track listing is as follows: (Side A) Mai Soso Ke Wanka, Waƙar Choge, Zage Zogala, (Side B) Waƙar Duwaiwai, Waƙar Alhazawa, Waƙar Sakarai. The EMI (Nigeria) Ltd listing on Discogs.com does not show Barmani Choge as one of the artists for the label.

Polygram Records (Nigeria) (now Premier Music) also recorded one cassette of Barmani's songs in 1987 when the company released a tape titled 'Mai Soso Ke Wanka' with a catalogue number POLP 162. It has six tracks – (Side A) Mai Soso Ke Wanka, Gwarne Ikon Allah, Waƙar Da'a,

However, her most memorable performances were captured by freelance ethnomusicologists, such as the late Musa Nasale in Kano, who recorded her songs on many occasions on tapes and released them publicly in the various street markets in northern Nigeria.

### **Notes**

- 1 Thomas A. Hale, "Griottes: Female voices from West Africa," *Research in African Literatures*, 25(3): 1996, pp. 71-91.
- 2 Hale, "Grittoes," p. 71.
- 3 Abdalla Uba Adamu, "Womanist ethos and Hausa domestic ecology: A structuralist analysis of Barmani Choge's operetta, Sakaraiba ta da wayo (Useless woman)," in S. Abdu (Ed.). *Poetry and Poetics: Proceedings of the 5th Conference on Literature in Northern Nigeria* (Bayero University Kano: Department of English and French, 2008), pp. 93-120.
- 4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfzQd38-SWg>.
- 5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUsjeCha2mw>.
- 6 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0EjwDrrl\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0EjwDrrl_A).
- 7 This term was coined by Marshall Goodwin Simms Hodgson, "The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Vol. 1," *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (University of Chicago Press, 1974).
- 8 Version 2 (studio recording): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gChBhOdX-FA>.
- 9 Version 1 (live): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BF0tWJfLHFA>.
- 10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irPt6xuzrfe>.
- 11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAe9f1Ypre8>.