

# More Than Being Housewives Images and Roles of Women in Folk Music and Its Performance in Northern Nigeria

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Article abstract

Many women in northern Nigeria have been treated as second class citizens, and some are still treated that way. They are expected to focus more on their traditional role as housewives and mothers than on being political leaders, religious leaders and civil servants. Yet, both Muslim and Christian women in northern Nigeria are increasingly employing effective strategies that could help them to resist those restrictions and prove to their male counterparts that they can contribute to the educational, social and economic development of Nigeria if given the opportunity. An effective medium through which women of northern Nigeria sell their capabilities and potentialities is their music and musical performances. Perhaps it is safe to say that women's involvement in politics and public services has been strengthened partially through their "rebellious" musical actions. This article describes and examines the images and roles of women as depicted in women's folk music and folk music performances in northern Nigeria.

# MORE THAN BEING HOUSEWIVES

## Images and Roles of Women in Folk Music and Its Performance in Northern Nigeria<sup>1</sup>

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Custom and social convention in northern Nigeria limit women's freedom of speech and leadership roles in politics, education, the military and religion. Men publicly exercise authority and are associated with work in the public sector, while women in this predominantly Muslim region tend to be associated with the home and mothering.<sup>2</sup> But *matan arewa* (northern women) of both Muslim and Christian faiths understand themselves and their social roles differently than custom and convention dictate. And in the context of folk music and its performance, women's views can be heard and they can express their perspectives on social, religious and political issues in both private and public with some degree of freedom.

During my fieldwork in northern Nigeria over the past ten years, I noted that the women who assemble in church at least twice a week to learn new songs and to rehearse for upcoming performances form a community of women and use their religious and social roles to create a social space in which they can feel free and relaxed. These church women also realize their personal potential and develop leadership qualities which they would stifle in the presence of men. Today, women's involvement in national politics and other public sectors has been strengthened partially through their musical activities.

I conducted field research in Borno state of Nigeria where I recorded songs performed by women and interviewed women recognized in their

1. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the annual general meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in St. John's, Newfoundland in 1997. I would like to thank Diane Tye and Pauline Greenhill for their editorial comments and suggestions.
2. On the traditional association of women with home and mothering, see also Lawless (1993: 268-269) and Ortner (1974: 67-87).

communities as musicians. During my first fieldwork, in 1988, I collected data for my Master's thesis (Haruna 1989); during my second, from December 1994 to April 1995, I collected data for my Ph.D. dissertation (Haruna 1998). I used various methods, but two — participant observation and interviewing — provided me with the most information.

As a woman born and bred in northern Nigeria, who speaks some northern Nigerian languages, including Hausa and Bura, I was accepted as an equal in most of the situations I was observing, so I studied performances which were generally natural and unaffected. Sometimes I simply looked from “the outside in and describ[ed] the situation” as I saw it (Goldstein 1964: 77), but at other times I also participated, dancing or singing choruses. Thus I was not only able to observe what went on around me, but I could also feel and experience the interactions. I was able to identify with other participants, and thus to obtain additional information from them. Their insights in turn assisted me in formulating meaningful questions for interviews with audience members as well as with women musicians.

One problem with assuming the role of participant observer is that I could not take notes during a performance, and had to delay putting my impressions on paper until afterwards. When a music event was long or had a large number of separate actions, I could not retain in my memory all that needed to be remembered and recorded. This happened particularly when the performance was part of lengthy, complex activities marking weddings, funerals, festivals and anniversaries. Fortunately, I realized the problem early, and stopped participating. Instead, I just observed the performances. I was then able to view as clearly and objectively as possible the entire kaleidoscope of activities, and take notes.

I sat in the audience and when I needed to write down an impression, I would bring my notepad from my handbag. Once finished my notes, I would replace the notepad to avoid drawing attention to my actions. Observing a musical event in an open space with a large crowd of people, some walking around and others dancing, especially in the front yard of a community leader, I tried to avoid inducing self-consciousness in the participants to a degree which might radically affect the situation. So, when they were on break I would either sit in my car or go to the bathroom and put my impressions on paper. I was fortunate to have had the assistance of a technically trained recording artist who accompanied me to social events and recorded them. Through these recorded performances, I was able to refresh my memories and also identify aspects that I had initially overlooked.

As a northern Nigerian folk music fan, I have attended women's performances not only during my Borno fieldwork, but also for my own enjoyment and in other states including Adamawa, Bauchi, Yobe, Plateau, Kano, Kaduna and Kwara. I was thus able to analyze the music of women of northern Nigeria by relying not only on my formal fieldwork data, but also on my previous informal experiences and understanding.

The texts considered in this article were composed and performed by indigenous women, not by those who immigrated from southern to northern Nigeria. While the Christian women's music I observed and recorded comprised mostly religious songs, the Muslim women's did not. Rather, their songs mainly expressed strong protest and resistance to aspects of their culture that have negative impacts on women. Some addressed their marginalization in both the home and society, while others spoke against polygamy, which is practiced by many Muslim men in northern Nigeria (Madauchi and Isa 1968: 19-21). This article does not directly focus on the similarities and differences between these two groups and their music. Instead, I explore and describe how both use music and performances to implicitly or explicitly weaken men's authority or dominance and to encode personal, social and political messages.

I observed and recorded Christian and Muslim women musicians who perform either solo or in groups in various northern Nigerian states including Borno, Adamawa, Bauchi, Plateau, and Kaduna. Some live in urban areas and others in rural communities. Both the Christian and Muslim women's singing groups who live in towns and cities often comprise various ethnic groups, but sing mostly in the Hausa language. A Christian women's singing group could sometimes consist of up to thirty members; Muslim women's singing groups may have up to fifteen. Rural women often sing in their local languages, such as the Bura women singers in Biu Emirate of Borno State who sing in the Bura language.

Beside collecting songs myself, I also obtained videos and tapes of women's music which had been previously recorded at various social events by individuals, institutions and organizations. For example, I acquired recordings of Muslim women's songs which individuals made during their own wedding ceremonies, or at those of their relatives or friends. In addition, I got copies of video recordings of folk music performed by Muslim women from the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Maiduguri, and from Borno Radio Television (BRTV), Maiduguri. Among the performers were Hajia Maimuna Barmani Choge and her all-female singing group and a singing group from Government

Girls' Secondary School Kwa. Their performances were recorded for celebrations such as New Year and Nigerian Independence Day, or for documentaries.

Like the Bedouin women of Egypt interviewed by Egyptian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, most northern Nigerian women are not "idle women imprisoned in sumptuous quarters awaiting the attentions of their master (Abu-Lughod 1985: 637)." They feel that if given the same opportunities, they could be men's equals and partners in politics, education, and other public social services. Yet the walls which men have built to hinder women entering the male dominated public world seem so thick and high that they cannot be easily demolished. The separations are similar to those described by Abu-Lughod for Bedouin culture in Egypt. The women's and men's worlds:

coexist side by side, a function not of the wishes and power of particular men, but of the sexual division of labor and a social system structured by the primacy of agnatic bonds (those between male and female paternal kin) and the authority of senior kinsmen, and maintained by individuals whose attitudes and actions are guided by a shared moral ideology (Abu-Lughod 1985: 649-650).

Through their music and musical performances, women demonstrate that they can be more than housewives, mothers and homemakers. Although music making is not a lucrative business for them, today many are actively involved in it on various social occasions such as at naming ceremonies, weddings, party campaigns, religious ceremonies and festivals. Many talented and skilled women sing under the auspices of religious and social groups. One of the most popular is the *Zumunta Mata Ekleziya* [Christian Women's Fellowship]. This group has a branch in almost every church in northern Nigeria and is open to every married Christian woman. One of its successes is the enhancement and development of personal skills and qualities among Christian women in northern Nigeria.

In every gathering of women, Christian or Muslim, they form a community. There is relaxed informality, physical intimacy, warmth and animated conversation. When women assemble to rehearse for upcoming performances, they sit close to one another, chatting and laughing. Some hold their babies in their laps to suckle them; others tie their infants on their backs with wrappers. There is occasional teasing of newlyweds and women in the early stages of pregnancy. Even in encounters with newcomers, women easily become acquainted by greeting each other, introducing themselves, exchanging

stories and offering personal services like braiding hair. Women loan money to others with financial problems and donate food stuffs to those who do not have enough. Members of the Christian Women's Fellowship learn home economics and childcare either from experts among their number or from invited outsiders. They learn to knit and sew clothes, to preserve condiments and vegetables for use when they are out of season, and to prepare homemade cream and soap. Women are involved in community services such as volunteer work and visits to the sick in homes and hospitals. They express their sympathies and prayers for the sick through songs and words of exhortation, and give gifts of money or prepared meals. Furthermore, women learn from each other about current affairs and political situations in the country, issues which their husbands generally do not discuss with them. Women feel more comfortable in the company of other women than in the company of men (Abu-Lughod 1985: 651). Together, they freely discuss shared experiences, interests and concerns created by their shared social status.

Northern Nigerian women use their communities to support one another. But one of their main strategies to reveal their true nature to each other and to the world is through folk music and folk music performance. Women's music has what Joan N. Radner calls "feminist messages" that allow them to encode personal, social and political messages (Radner 1993: 34). I will begin by discussing the traditional stereotypical images of women to clarify gender policies, relationships and hierarchies in northern Nigeria. I will contrast these misleading perceptions with four feminist images of women in northern Nigeria depicted through women's music and musical performances. Finally I will discuss how these performances change the traditional ways women are perceived.

### **Traditional Images of Women in Northern Nigeria**

Men's attempts to have authority over women and to relegate them to the domestic sphere are not limited to northern Nigeria, but this locale provides a good case study. Polly Stewart's description of the conditions for women's success and failure in a male-dominated and patriarchal society depicted in some Child ballads is a surprisingly accurate reflection of the position of women in northern Nigeria today:

A woman's achievement of something approximating success for herself is often accompanied by its opposite, failure, in the expectation of the larger society. This is because in the society depicted in the ballads, male

prerogatives, including all those commonly found within the patriarchy — decision making, sexual control, ownership of family, and the assumption that the best place for a woman is in the nuclear family, propagating the race — are primary. Men are not punished for assaults on women; the family is initiated by the man, often without the woman's consent. An unmarried woman is fair game. A married woman, as chattel, takes any initiatives at her peril.... The irony is that within such a restricted framework, a woman who seeks goals of her own, if these goals run counter to the social and cultural expectations established for her, will thus be achieving personal success only by effecting cultural failure in denying or escaping her designated role (Stewart 1993: 56-57).

From a male perspective, a virtuous woman is a mother, a faithful and submissive wife, a protector of the family, the hearth, the home, and an advocate of religious piety.<sup>3</sup> The public/private, dominant/submissive, male/female dichotomy applies to the personal and social lives of both Muslims and Christians but is more prominently expressed among Muslims.

Often, men's songs about women are influenced by Muslim belief that there are strict rights, duties and responsibilities upon men in their dealings with women and vice versa. Men's compositions and performances about women with whom they are romantically involved usually portray positive images of them. Notable examples of love songs men composed about their women lovers are Haruna Uji's song about Balaraba; Avi Pwasi's love song about Gija Kwandza, and Musa Gwoadzang's song about Yarami Audu.<sup>4</sup> These describe and praise the physical beauty of the female protagonists and ascribe to them the attributes of divine figures such as angels. But outside such contexts, men usually compose and sing songs that impose rules on women and infringe on their freedom and fundamental rights. Women who are single, divorced, out-going, disrespectful to their husbands and unwilling or unable to cook delicious meals are criticized and ridiculed. This hierarchical system is influenced jointly by patriarchy and by Muslim culture.<sup>5</sup>

The images in the women's songs I recorded seem to contradict these male images and social roles. I have chosen representative women singers,

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3. For men's association of women with domestic spheres also see Lawless (1993), and Luxton (1980: especially 12-21).
  4. Videos of performances of the songs of Dan Maraya Jos, Haruna Uji, and Avi Pwasi are found in the video archive of the Nigerian Television Authority, Maiduguru; the song by Musa Gwoadzang was recorded during field research in 1995.
  5. On sexual segregation outside northern Nigeria see Abu-Lughod (1979: 638-641), Bujra (1979: 13-15), and Sharma (1979: 259-282).

recognized regionally as advocates of women's rights and torch bearers of feminist images: the *Zumunta Mata Ekliziya* [Christian Women's Fellowship] and Hajiya Maimuna Barmani Choge's singing groups. In the following section, I analyze a selection of their songs. Among them are texts through which women satirize male chauvinism, portray feminist images, protest and resist discrimination and control by men, and express their views on current social and political problems and suggest solutions.

### **Women Singers and Coding Strategies for Social Resistance**

Through songs, women challenge and resist their individual and collective subordination and marginalization. I have already indicated that women in northern Nigeria are not expected to be publicly aggressive and outspoken on matters such as politics, nor are they allowed to actively participate in politics, education and religious affairs. So why can they freely and without restriction express their views on social, political and religious issues through songs, often with men as their primary audience? There is no simple answer to this question, not even from the singers themselves. In a personal interview,<sup>6</sup> Saraya Mwarinkir Waziri said that her ability to sing at social occasions such as wedding ceremonies, church services and funerals is a gift from God, so that she can be used as a messenger to preach to her audiences through songs. As Ruth Finnegan points out, perhaps expression through songs "takes the sting out of the communication and removes it from the real social arena (Finnegan 1977: 224)."

But another possible explanation for women's freedom of expression through songs could be their ability to encode personal, social, political and religious messages which, if expressed overtly through ordinary speech, would be threatening or unacceptable to some men. Through songs, women use implicit or explicit coding strategies that can protect them from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages. Simultaneously, they ultimately empower themselves by making their views heard and potentially effecting changes for the singers and their listeners (Radner and Lanser 1993).

Coding strategies which women use in songs include indirections such as metaphors, ironies, proverbs and euphemisms. The singer's goal is to create ambiguity and distance when expressing forbidden ideas such as political and

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6. Personal interview on January 22, 1995 at Kidang village.



sexual impulses.<sup>7</sup> Women singers also use nonverbal modes of communication as indirections and distractions through instrumental music, dance, mimicking, clapping, laughing and ululating. Hajiya Barmani Choge and her band usually accompany their singing with instrumental (calabash) music and sexually provocative dances admired by their male audiences. Women singers thus use distraction and humour as strategies to draw out or draw attention away from the “subversive” power of feminist messages (Radner and Lanser 1993: 15-16).

### Women Singers and Religion

Many women in northern Nigeria demonstrate strong enthusiasm for and devotion to their faiths. Although in religious leadership roles, men tend to assume high positions compared to their female counterparts, women tend to be more committed to and more enthusiastic about expressing their religious faith than men.<sup>8</sup> However, a large number of religious women do not seem to consciously or overtly use the liberating promises of scriptures to change theologies (Lawless 1993: 258). The connection women maintain with conservative religious doctrines and patriarchal constructs seems to provide a gateway for women to acquire the position of power in Islam and in Christianity (Lawless 1993: 258). This means that a woman's spirituality can earn her respect and acceptance among men. Being spiritual, she is considered virtuous, hence capable of nurturing members of her religion and ministering to them through songs and acts of charity (Lawless 1993: 273). Women use this empowerment to demonstrate their equality with men, especially in doing the work of God. Through their musical performances and acts of charity, women preach, educate, counsel and inspire people in their communities. For instance, during Sunday church services, crusades, Christian weddings, funerals and other Christian events, members of the Christian Women's Fellowship who are invited to perform music at these occasions often take advantage of an accepted role to make “unacceptable” statements such as educating, counseling and preaching to their large audiences through songs. The following song was sung by members of the Christian Women's Fellowship at a church service in Marama town in Borno state in 1995.

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7. On the use of indirection and trivialization as coding methods also see Radner and Lanser (1993 16-19), and Stewart (1993: 54-73).
  8. For men assuming superior hierarchical position in religion in Europe and in North America, see James (1978: 279-281).

**Bura**

Zumunta mata shanga mbru ka talentu,  
 Ka mbru hara kithlir bzir Hyel.  
 Mbru mjiir Ekleziya shanga mbru ka talentu,  
 Ka mbru hara kithlir bzir Hyel.  
 Shilir Ekleziyia shanga giri ka talentu,  
 Ka giri hara kithlir bzir Hyel.

Yesu Kita talentu ka na ala mbru  
 Ma mbru kithlir ni wa,  
 Mbru ata wuta ribar dlu mu?

Mda na ku nggita ka hara kithlir ka talentu,  
 Tsa ata wuta ribar bzir Hyel.  
 Shili na ku nggita ka hara kithlir ka talentu,  
 Da ata wuta ribar bzir Hyel.  
 Mwanki na ku nggita ka hara kithlir ka talentu,  
 Da ata wuta ribar bzir Hyel.

Zumanta mata shanga mbru ka talentu,  
 Ka mbru hara kithlir bzir Hyel.  
 Shilir Ekleziyia shang giri ka talentu,  
 Ka giri hara kithlir bzir Hyel.

Yesu kita talentu ka na ala mbru  
 Ma mbru a kitlir ni wa,  
 Mbru ata wuta ribar dlu mi?

**English**

Christian women we all have talents,  
 So let us do the work of God.  
 Christians we all have talents,  
 So let us do the work of God.  
 Christian men you all have talents,  
 Use them to do the work of God.

Jesus gave us talents  
 If we do not use them,  
 How can we be rewarded?

Anyone who uses the given talents,  
 Will receive reward from God.  
 Men who use their talents  
 They will receive reward from God.  
 Women who use their talents,  
 They will receive reward from God.

Christian women we all have talents,  
 So let us do the work of God.  
 Christian men you all have talents,  
 Use them to do the work of God.

Jesus gave us talents  
 If we do not use them  
 How can we be rewarded?

The singers encourage their listeners to be more committed to serving God. They also implicitly preach women's equality with men, especially in the sight of God. They highlight the fact that God treats men and women equally by endowing both with talents; anyone who uses his or her talents well will be rewarded. Through their enthusiastic and liberating musical performances at religious services and ceremonies, women often realize their desire to play key social and religious roles that constitute a reversal of status in a society where women are expected to take a subordinate role (Lawless 1993: 268).

In northern Nigeria, Christian women cannot be church pastors and rarely are they allowed to do conventional preaching from the pulpit during church services and in public Christian gatherings such as crusades, seminars and conventions. However, members of the Christian Women's Fellowship assemble in a church twice or three times a week to learn new songs and rehearse their music for an upcoming performances and they usually take the opportunity to conduct church services among themselves. The *Uwar Zumunta Mata*

(Mother of the Christian Women's Fellowship) serves as a "pastor" for the women. She chairs the gathering, coordinates the activities, and preaches biblical feminist messages. As a Christian, I found the Christian Women's Fellowship leader's preaching to be as moving as that of an ordained church pastor.

The Christian Women's Fellowship is not a highly structured organization. However, it has an executive body headed by the *Uwar Zumanta Mata* (Mother of the Christian Women's Fellowship), a secretary, a treasurer, a financial secretary, a song director as well as various sub-committees such as a visitation team, a hospitality team and a counseling committee. Each leader of a sub-committee gives comprehensive reports on the activities of her committee and demonstrates leadership skills. Their work in this area shows the arbitrariness of their exclusion from authority outside the female domain.<sup>9</sup>

It is not only Christian women who demonstrate knowledge and commitment to their faith through songs. Under normal circumstances, Muslim women are neither allowed to be religious leaders nor to preach through the conventional methods used by *Imams* (male preachers). But Muslim women singing groups are invited to sing religious songs on radio and television. During the celebration marking the end of *Ramadan* (thirty days fasting), Muslim women are invited to perform religious and secular music to entertain their male and female audiences. The freedom which Muslim women have to perform at public events gives them the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and commitment to their faith by preaching to millions of listeners through religious songs.

### **Social Roles of Women Singers in Times of Bereavement**

In northern Nigeria, both men and women can attend the same funeral ritual, but only the women cry and sing dirges. Men consider these acts strictly women's emotional indulgence. This gender specificity of funeral dirge performance is, in some ways, good for women because they express grievances and afflictions peculiar to women in a male-dominated society (Chaves 1980: 138). When death occurs, women, in larger numbers than men, assemble at the house of the deceased to offer their condolences to the mourners. When a Christian dies, members of the Christian Women's Fellowship in the community where the death occurs usually gather in the house of the bereaved

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9. On women's ability to preach and handle leadership positions in the church also see Lawless (1993: 258-59).

to perform music at the wake keeping, the burial and the funeral ceremony. The women's goal is to help ease the grief and sorrow of the mourners by consoling and entertaining them with Christian songs, instrumental music and dance. However, as Saraya Mwarinkir Waziri indicates, women singers' social role is not limited to consoling the bereaved:

On funeral occasions, I will carefully observe how people come in crying and looking sad. Some will be in deep thoughts. Whenever I observe the grieving of these people and those buried in deep thoughts, I will then compose and sing songs that will reflect their feelings and songs which will console and comfort them. If I am touched by the Holy Spirit as a result of the Word of God that has been preached at the funeral, I will also preach to the people at the funeral through songs (Waziri 1995).

Thus, women singers take advantage of their participation in funeral ceremonies to counsel and preach to their listeners. They also educate their audience on the philosophy of life, especially the transience of life, on mortality and on life after death.<sup>10</sup> Some of these philosophical and educational messages were expressed in the following song, which was composed and performed by members of the Christian Women's Fellowship at a funeral in 1989 at Marama town in Borno State.

**Bura**

Ka giri ndzi diya ka mbwi diffu  
Saka arni ani hara,  
Bonir duniya tsa ku msiri.  
Ka giri ndzi diya ka mbwi diffu  
Saka arni ani hara,  
Bonir duniya tsa ku msiri.

**English**

Please be comforted  
His time was up,  
He is now free from the sufferings in this world.  
Please be comforted  
His time was up,  
He has gone home he is free.

Wala mbru ani tuwa ka tuwa ka  
Ka pumta shimwi  
Mbru a tuwa ni ka wuta wa.

Even if we cry and cry  
And shed a lot of tears  
Our cries can't bring him back.

Wala mbru ani tuwa ka tuwa  
Ka pci ni ra tiri  
Mbru a tuwa ni ka wuta

Even if we cry and cry  
Until the sun goes down  
Our cries can not bring him back.

Wala mbru ani dzama ka dzama

Even if we think and think

10. On the role of women as composers and performers of powerful and inspirational funeral songs also see Bourke (1993: 160-182), Chaves (1986: 129-157; 169-194), and Seremetakis (1987: 108-110).

Tar viri ata kur diya  
Mbru a nkata heni  
Ka dzata wa.

Until daybreak  
Our sleepless night  
Can not give us the answers.<sup>11</sup>

The singers encourage the mourners to exercise restraint in grieving for the dead, console them with the reminder of philosophical and Christian ideas regarding human mortality. Women's words of consolation expressed through funeral songs often reduce mourners' feelings of sadness and deprivation caused by the death of their loved one(s). Many have expressed their gratitude to members of the Christian Women's Fellowship for consoling them through music. I talked with people who said that they would have grieved longer or become suicidal if the Christian Women's Fellowship had not comforted and preached to them through songs. This is in keeping with woman's traditional role as nurturer, but both the public performance and the active intervention go beyond stereotype.

The women's messages may extend beyond the subject of death and be directed to an audience other than the mourners. As in Ireland, women sing dirges at funerals that formally and publicly "transmit a rhetoric of resistance to male dominance," challenge authorities, criticize their enemies and give graphic personal experience accounts of violence and abuse (Bourke 1993: 160-161). The laments may include accusations of government agents such as soldiers and the police for being responsible for the death by not combatting crime which led to the murder of the deceased. Or the dirges may incorporate strong reactions and complaints about witchcraft or men's violence against women if either contributed to the death.

## Women Singers and Family Values

Women can also choose happy occasions to get their points across. They demonstrate their responsibilities for encouraging family values and for maintaining community ties, especially when invited to perform at wedding ceremonies. At these social events, women often sing about relationships such as marriage and kinship. Here they have the opportunity to publicly comment on gender relations and their views can heard by a large male audience. While displaying their artistry in the spheres of song making, instrumental music and dance, the women also reveal their sense of humour as they entertain the

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11. The song was composed by Saraya Mwarinkir Waziri and performed by the Christian Women's Fellowship under her leadership.

bride, bridegroom and wedding guests. Most importantly, they try to educate their listeners by giving them tips on how to have happy and successful marriages. For instance, they advise the newlyweds and other married couples to honour their marriage vows. In the following song,<sup>12</sup> members of the Christian Women's Fellowship demonstrated their inclination and ability to educate and counsel newlyweds and other married couples.

**Bura**

Mallama Kuceli ga ku msiri  
Ga adya dima kira wa  
Ga ku wuta salir nga.  
Mallim Tunde ga ku msiri  
Ga adiya dima kira wa  
Ga ku wuta mwalar nga

Mallim Tunde ga ku msiri  
Ga adiya dima kira wa  
Ga ku la at kiyir nga.  
Mallama Kuceli ga ku msiri  
Ga adiya dima kira wa  
Ga ku lukwa mbar nga.

Alkawal ti giri hara  
Ka giri bilata,  
Madar mima yeru at kid giri.  
Pasto ku yuta giri  
Anta giri pila "ceyi"  
Madar mima yeru saida giri.

Wala mini hara ala giri  
Giri adiya tsukdzi wa  
Ka giri ndzi ka mbwidiffu.  
Wala kwaba duku ti giri wuta  
Madar muma giri  
Adiya huni mai.

Alkawal ti giri hara  
Ga giri bilata,  
Madar muma yeru ata kida giri.

**English**

Mrs. Kuceli you are lucky  
You should no longer worry  
Because you now have a husband.

Mr. Tunde you are lucky  
You should no longer worry  
Because you now have a wife.

Mr. Tunde you are lucky  
You should no longer worry  
Because you now have your own home.

Mrs. Kuceli you are lucky  
You should no longer worry  
Because you now have your own home.

The promises you made to each other  
Please keep them,  
Our brethren we enjoin you  
The pastor asked you  
And you said "Yes."  
Brethren we are witnesses.

No matter what happens between you  
Please do not fight  
Please be patient with each other.  
Even if you have only one kobo<sup>13</sup>  
Brethren do not be selfish  
To each other.

The promises you made to each other  
Please keep them,  
Brethren we enjoin you.

12. Presented at a wedding ceremony in Yola town on 8 November 1991.

13. *Kobo* is the lowest denomination of Nigerian currency, the equivalent to the Canadian cent.

The treatment of marriage as an important social institution and the expectation of everyone involved to work towards its success are poignantly expressed in the song. Here women's views about marriage counter traditional roles by indicating that men also are responsible for marriage relationship and family care. Similar sentiments are expressed by members of the Christian Women's Fellowship when they were invited to perform at another Christian wedding ceremony.<sup>14</sup>

**Bura**

Ya madar muma nzi ka yeru pila ala giri  
 Sauri ndzi akwa ki giri.  
 Ya madar muma ndzi ka yeru thlipa ala giri  
 Laku ndzi akwa kyi giri.  
 Ma saka laga wala bedi  
 Ana sinta mpa akwa ndzi ndzyir kuta kyi.  
 Ma saka laga wala gyeli  
 Ana sinta mpa akwa ndzi ndziyir kuta kyi.

**English**

Brethren let us tell you  
 The secret of happy marriage.  
 Brethren let us teach you  
 How to live happily in your home.  
 Sometimes even arguments  
 Can result in quarrels in the family.  
 Sometimes even jokes  
 Can result in quarrels in the family.

Su na ti hyel ku pakta  
 Ka mda ndkimta wa  
 Ti giri nggata ni jiri madar maya.

As you have been told,  
 What God has joined together  
 Let no one put asunder.<sup>15</sup>

This song reflects women's tendencies to give impartial advice to new couples. In men's compositions about fidelity, respect and tolerance in the marriage relationship, usually the bride or wife is the main target. For example, Dan Maraya Jos describes a marriage in which the woman is made a villain. She is undisciplined, disrespectful, cannot cook delicious meals, too outgoing; hence she is not a "good" wife. However, in marriage-related songs composed and sung by women, both husband and wife are addressed. Women singers acknowledge that a marriage relationship requires that both partners make an effort. Thus, their warnings that unrestrained arguments and malevolent jokes can escalate into fights are addressed to the bride, bridegroom, and other married couples in the audience. This seems to be an implicit commentary to men.

14. Presented at Bindirim, a village in Borno State, on April 12, 1995.

15. When this song was sung by the Christian Women's Fellowship, the lead singer was Saraya Mwarinkir Waziri. The last statement, "What God has joined together let no one put asunder" is an idea learned by the singers from the Bible (Mathew 19:6), previously read by the pastor who preached at the wedding ceremony. The singers incorporated the verse into a new song.

Despite women's implicit attack on men who abuse their wives and discriminate against women, I observed that many men, both Christian and Muslim, love to watch and listen to women's performances, especially members of the Christian Women's Fellowship as they perform at wedding ceremonies. Many men I talked to told me that their primary attraction to such performances is the instrumental music and the dance, followed by the songs. But as men listen to the songs, they cannot avoid hearing the messages directed to them. When I was recording one performance of the Christian Women's Fellowship, the male chairperson of the wedding reception told the men in the audience to form a singing group similar to the group formed by Christian women so as to "avoid going to hell."

In public gatherings where men are present, Muslim women in the audience are expected to be veiled, passive listeners. But the situation is different when it comes to musical performances. Muslim women and men have equal rights to perform at public events. Muslim women singing groups are invited by individuals, government officials and organizations to perform for male, female and mixed audiences. The freedom to express their views, especially in songs that are not strictly religious, is very significant to Muslim women. They take the opportunity to publicly comment on social, political and religious issues that affect women such as polygamy, forced marriage, and their treatment by men as second class citizens. Furthermore, Muslim women singers advise and educate their female audiences about relationships, how to avoid victimization and how to achieve personal success.

Hajiya Maimuna Barmani Choge is one of the most popular Hausa Muslim women singers in northern Nigeria. Choge uses her singing skill as subversive discourse, an outlet for the empowerment of women and resistance to male dominance and discrimination.<sup>16</sup> Many of her songs concern Muslim women's relationships with men toward whom women respond, outside songs, with anger, frustration or denial of concern.<sup>17</sup> Through songs, Choge gives advice to her fellow Muslim women who are confronted with the problems of male dominance and polygamy. Like African women writers such as Maryama Ba, Zaynab Alkali, Buchi Emecheta and the late Flora Nwapa, the urgency for

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16. For women using songs as subversive discourse or outlets for protests and resistance also see Abu-Lughod (1990: 46-47), and Radner and Lanser (1993: 33).

17. The tendency for Muslim women to sing about relationships with members of the opposite sex is also revealed by Abu-Lughod in her study of Bedouin women (Abu-Lughod 1990: 46-47; 1985: 654-656, Bourke 1993: 170-172, Keyes 1993: 33).



Choge to communicate her views and feelings through music causes her to compose and sing songs about real life experiences and events (Alkali 1984, Nwapa 1966, Emecheta 1975 and 1979, Bâ 1981). Choge is known to her female and male audiences as a Muslim singer and feminist who criticizes and protests against social problems such as corrupt governments, discrimination against women, polygamy, domestic violence and forced marriage.<sup>18</sup>

In the following song, Choge negates and challenges polygamy which Islam permits Muslim men to practice. Lashing out at people who are in the business of helping married men to take additional wives, the song has a chorus sung by four women: Rakiya, Zulia, Hajara and A'ishatu, who accompany the singing with calabash instrumental music and dance. The song describes the experience of a Muslim woman in a polygamous marriage. In particular, it addresses a husband's betrayal of his wife of many years by marrying a second, younger woman because his first wife is old. The speaker accuses her husband of having lied when he said he would never marry a second wife and of further injustice when he completes his marriage plans without telling his first wife. There is also a portrayal of survival strategies which Muslim married women use to threaten and resist the tendencies by their husbands to practice polygamy.<sup>19</sup>

#### Hausa

Choge: Yan'uwana daɓin Fatsima  
Wa yake so ai mata kishiya?

Chorus: Dare Allah magani  
Choge: Dakata ka ji sankira kadan  
Muna zamanmu da malam  
Malami  
Ba fushi ba tashin hankali  
Tun ina ya brinyata dadi,  
Sai na ce masa ya yi mini kishiya.

#### English

My sisters, relations of Fatima  
Who ever wants to have a co-wife?

God sees in the dark!  
Wait and listen to my short story.  
I was living in harmony with my husband  
Who is a *malam*.<sup>20</sup>  
Without tensions and without quarrels.  
When I was still a young woman,  
I told him to marry a second wife.

18. In songs which members of the Christian Women's Fellowship sing about marriage, they often promote sanctity of marriage and women's submission to their husbands because they are not faced with the threat of polygamy like their Muslim counterparts.
19. Most Muslim married men in northern Nigeria are polygamists. Many marry up to four wives, the maximum number which Islam permits, but some marry more. Some Christian men are also polygamous, though the church does not approve. Most traditional rulers in northern Nigeria are polygamous. Some have more than ten wives.
20. *Malam* in this context is a man who is an Islamic teacher.

Sai ya ce mini, "Ke daya kin isa."  
 To da dai ya ga tsufa ya gabato,  
 Tsufa ya riga ya tar da ni.  
 Sai ya ce mani aure za ya yi.  
 To ni ban taba ko zaginsa ba  
 Ranan na ce mashi,  
 "Ka ji munafiki!"  
 Chorus: Dare Allah magani!  
 Choge: Wanda ya yi maka hanyar kishiya  
 Kai wata tara ba ki gaida shi ba.  
 Dare da rana Allah ya isa  
 Chorus: Dare Allah magani!  
 Choge: Ku tsaya ku ji sunan kishiya.  
 Bakar kunama mai harbin tsiya!  
 Bakin maciji mai cizon tsiya!  
 Karya matssetseku mai baki dari.  
 Mai hakoriin cizo shegiya.  
 In ta kama sai ta girgiza.  
 Chorus: Dare Allah magani!  
 Choge: Ina zaman gidan miji,  
 Zaman irin mai ban sha'wa.  
 Ina jin dadi, babu hayaniya.  
 Chorus: Dare Allah magani!  
 Choge: Wata rana miji na ya ce mani  
 Yana so ya yi mini kishiya.  
 Na ce, "Malam, ai haka ya yi kyau.  
 Ashe zan sami abokiyar zama."  
 Chorus: Dare Allah magani!  
 Choge: Bai sani ba akwai nawa  
 A zuciya.  
 In dai ni ce a wanan gida,  
 Ba na barin har wata shegiya  
 Ta shig mini wai ita kishiya.  
 Chorus: Dare Allah magani!  
 Choge: Da dare yayi na ce wa miji na,  
 "Zan tafi unguwa."  
 Na zarce sai gidan wani malami.  
 Malam nan ya yi mini maraba.  
 Chorus: Dare Allah magani!

And he said, "You are enough for me."  
 But when he saw that old age is coming,  
 I have become too old for him.  
 So he told me he is getting married.  
 I have never abused him  
 But on that day I said to him,  
 "Listen to this idiot!"  
 God sees in the dark!  
 The person who brings in for you a co-wife  
 Do not greet him for nine months.  
 Curse him every day and every night.  
 God sees in the dark!  
 Wait and hear the name of the co-wife.  
 Black scorpion with poisonous sting!  
 Black snake with poisonous bite!  
 A troublesome liar who gossips a lot.  
 She has teeth that bite terribly.  
 If she bites you she must tear you.  
 God sees in the dark!  
 I was living with my husband,  
 The type of marriage that is admired.  
 I was enjoying, there was no dispute.  
 God sees in the dark!  
 One day my husband said to me  
 He wants to bring in a co-wife to me.  
 And I said, "*Malam*, this is a good idea.  
 This means I will have a friend to live with."  
 God sees in the dark!  
 He did not know that I also have something  
 In my mind.  
 As long as I live in this house,  
 I will not allow any bastard  
 To come in and claim that she is my co-wife.  
 God sees in the dark!  
 In the night I said to my husband,  
 "I am going out for a visit."<sup>21</sup>  
 I went straight to a *malam's* house.  
 And the *malam* welcomed me.  
 God sees in the dark!

21. In northern Nigeria, Muslim married women, especially those who live in *purdah*, are restricted from paying visits to friends and relations during the daytime. They are only allowed to go out for occasional visits at nights in the company of their teenage daughters or sons serving as escorts.

Choge: Na ce, "malam, ina son ka taimaka,	"I want you to help me,
Miji na zai yi mini kishiya."	My husband is bringing to me a co-wife."
Chorus: Dare Allah magani!	God sees in the dark!
Choge: Malam ya ce, "Ai da ma na sani.	The <i>malam</i> said, "I already know about it.
Amma in son in sanar da ke,	But let me tell you,
Wannan aure dole za a yi!	This wedding will definitely take place!
Babu mai sa ya wargaje.	Nobody can cancel it.
Akwai taimako dan kankani	There is a small help
Da zan baki shi, in zaki so.	Which I can render to you, if you wish.
Bayan wannan aure ya tabbata,	After this wedding has taken place,
Zaki yi kokari ki wargaza."	You will then try and destroy it."
Chorus: Dare Allah magani!	God sees in the dark!
Choge: Malam ya bani kunshin magani.	The <i>malam</i> gave me some medicine.
Malam nan ya ce dani,	And the <i>malam</i> said to me,
"Ki barbada wannan magani	"Sprinkle this medicine
A cikin butar	Inside the kettle in which your husband
Sallah tasa."	Keeps water for his oblation." <sup>22</sup>
Chorus: Dare Allah magani!	God sees in the dark!

The singer reminds Muslim women that they are vulnerable to men both inside the home and outside, and that if they are to survive, they must outsmart them and the patriarchal system. The singer gives advice to her fellow married Muslim women about life and relationships. Specifically, she tells them how to annul or destroy their husband's marriages to other women, especially if the marriages were undertaken without their prior knowledge and consent. She advises them to resist having undesirable co-wives by going to *malams* (Islamic teachers) where they can obtain potions to make their husbands divorce their co-wives and to break friendships with people who play the role of matchmakers for married men.<sup>23</sup>

First wives often see co-wives as threats to their happy marriages, especially if the junior wives are "stubborn" or "disrespectful" to the senior wives. Hostilities and jealousies are revealed in the singer's metaphorical description of the vicious character of her teenage co-wife: "Black scorpion with poisonous sting! / Black snake with poisonous bite!"<sup>24</sup>

22. A version of this song has also been documented by Graham Furniss (1996: 142-145).

23. Other means women may use to deal with marital problems include reporting the matter to their religious leaders or in-laws or resorting to using judicial means by taking their complaints to their community leaders. If the problems cannot be resolved locally, they take the matter to *Sharia* court or area court.

24. For songs composed by Muslim women to challenge their husbands' marriages to second wives see also Abu-Lughod (1979: 655-656).

Singers address other social problems for women. They may also accuse and ridicule men, including their husbands, through songs about crimes such as stealing and for being irresponsible fathers. Forced marriage is another target of women, particularly young unmarried ones, often through songs. Usually, women sing such songs of resistance to let men know how they feel and to embarrass them at music events such as wedding ceremonies, festivals and the funerals of elderly people. In the following song, a potential victim of forced marriage protests:

**Bura**

Ya, i ata hira ni ja wa.  
I a hira wa, ya hir sal gajang wa.  
Mi kila sal gajang  
Ma tsa simbwa adara  
Ting b-o-om tsa pumpta hidi.

**English**

No, I do not want him.  
I do not want to marry an old man.  
If I marry an old man  
When he comes to my bedroom  
He will only pass farts b-o-om.

Mya na to i a kila sal jajang ni,  
Kuji ki ra kila malim.

Instead of marrying an old man  
I will prefer to marry a *malim*.<sup>25</sup>

Mi kila malim ma tsa simbwa adzara  
Ting tsa ata pila "Good morning."

If I marry a *malim*, when he comes to my bedroom  
He will at least say to me, "Good morning."

Poor parents often succumb to the temptation of marrying their teenage daughters to rich old men with the hope of gaining some material and monetary favours from the wealthy men. The speaker in the song protests and resists her father's decision to marry her to an old man for such financial benefits without her consent. Her reference to the old man farting when he comes to her bedroom is multivocal. It indicates the old man is weak and unable to control his bodily functions, but also suggests that he may be unable to perform sexually. The implication is that the old man is not socially and erotically compatible with the teenage girl in a marriage.

In contrast to the messages in their songs of protest, women also express their love and admiration for deserving men, composing and singing love songs to express their romantic feelings. In the following song performed by a married woman at a funeral ceremony of an old man, the singer publicly expresses her love for a man other than her husband:

**Bura**

Kura ka salirna ni msira aliwa  
Sai kuraka bangirna ani msira ali

**English**

My husband's voice is not sweet to me  
Only my lover's voice is sweet to me.

25. *Malim* in this context is a man who has acquired some level of western education such as a high school certificate or college degree and teaches in a school.

Kuraka Musamndia ni msira aliwa	Musamndia's voice is not sweet to me
Sai kuraka Markusu ani msira ali.	Only Markusu's voice is sweet to me.
Ka kita salirna ka psuni	I wish my husband was taken and thrown
Akwa kusar	Into the bush
Ka sinta ali Markusu	And my lover was brought to me
Ka yeru tira.	So that we could elope.

Ka kita Musamndia jomthlam mya	Take away Musamndia with his big mouth
Ka sinta ali Markusu na tander ra.	And bring to me Markusu who is handsome.

Unlike most women's songs about their romantic feelings for men other than their husbands, the messages in this song are not coded but directly expressed. The singer's admiration for her lover, Markusu, and her denunciation of her husband, Musamndia, are loud and clear.<sup>26</sup> Women, especially those who are victims of early or forced marriage, may fall in love with men other than their husbands. Some talk about their lovers through songs which they perform at public music events such as wedding ceremonies, festivals and funerals, as in this song.

### Women Singers and Politics

Through their music, women show their interest in and commitment to politics both at the local and national levels. Women's songs critical of bad governments and corrupt politicians have been so strong and direct that some government officials have accused them of subversion, influencing public opinion and inciting civil disobedience. Corruption, crime and victimization of innocent citizens by government officials became rampant during President Shehu Shagari's civilian regime from 1979 to 1983. In reaction to the escalating social and political problems, women singers, including members of the Christian Women's Fellowship lead by Saraya Mwarinkir Waziri, composed and sang songs that expressed their views and concerns about the political climate in Nigeria. According to Waziri, some politicians accused her of discouraging voters from voting for their party and reported her to her church pastor for being partisan through her music. She said her goal for singing songs about politicians or their parties was to give hope and comfort to her listeners who were disappointed by those they had voted into power (Waziri 1995). She commented that after she was reported to her pastor, she stopped

26. This song is quite similar to one composed and sung by a Ugandan woman in which she praises her lover and curses her husband. She invokes lightning to strike her husband and a snake to bite her husband but her lover should not be harmed (p'Bitek 1975: 57).

composing and singing songs that directly criticize politicians or political parties, for fear of being arrested and jailed. The following song is one of the political songs performed by members of the Christian Women's Fellowship led by Saraya Mwarinkir Waziri at a Christian rally:

<b>Hausa</b>	<b>English</b>
Lead singer: Ba NPN, babu NPN a can Sama	There is no NPN, there is no NPN in Heaven.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Ba GNPP, babu GNPP a can Sama.	There is no GNPP, there is no GNPP in Heaven.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Yesu shine Sarkinmu.	Jesus is our King.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Ba UPN, babu UPN a can Sama.	There is no UPN, there is no UPN in Heaven.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Yesu shine Ceton mu.	Jesus is our Saviour.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Ba wahala, Babu wahala a can Sama.	There is no suffering, There is no suffering in Heaven.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Yesu Shi ne zai cice mu.	Jesus will deliver us.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Akwai murna, Akwai murna a can Sama.	There is joy, There is joy in Heaven.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Domin Allah Shine Sarkinmu.	Because God is our King.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Ba zambanci Babu zambanci a can sama.	There is no corruption There is no corruption in Heaven.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!
Lead Singer: Domin Allah shine Sarkinmu.	Because God is our King.
Chorus: A Sama!	In Heaven!

On the surface, this song might seem to suggest that the singers are religious women who have been brainwashed by their religious leaders to put up with the evils perpetrated by their governments because they hope for a better life in heaven. On the contrary, the Christian Women's Fellowship use this apparently religious song to criticize a corrupt and oppressive regime and its architects. They indirectly criticize politicians and their ruling parties for their corruption and the victimization of innocent citizens during the 1979 to 1983 civilian regime. The ruling parties at the time were the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Great Nigeria People's party (GNPP), the Unity party of Nigeria (UPN), the National People's Party (NPP) and the People's Republican Party (PRP). The singers make a distinction between God's leadership and the

Nigerian politicians' leadership, reminding the politicians that it is only God who has ultimate power and authority. In contrast to God, whom they consider to be just and kind, they portray politicians as wicked and corrupt rulers, causing pain and suffering to the people who voted them into power.

## **Conclusion**

The issue for women singers in northern Nigeria is not the fact that they could do as well as men, but that they use song and song performance as a location of women's power and a demonstration of their capabilities. At music events, women singers in northern Nigeria often prove — especially to their male audiences — that women are forces to be reckoned with. They should not be seen or be treated only as housewives and mothers. When given the opportunity, they are just as good entertainers, teachers, preachers and politicians as their male counterparts. Songs composed and sung by women show that women are very much aware and mindful of the social, political, economic and religious situations in Nigeria. Most of the women recognized in their communities and states as professional singers assist in promoting good government by praising sound government policies and criticizing bad ones through songs.

Today, the Christian Women's Fellowship singing group is in high demand and is invited to almost every Christian wedding that takes place in northern Nigeria. They use the wedding occasions not only to entertain but also to teach, counsel and preach to their audiences through music and to describe and challenge social problems, such as domestic violence, forced marriage and the subordination of women, and to suggest solutions. Wedding ceremonies are considered incomplete without the presence of women singers to educate, counsel and entertain the bride, the groom and their wedding guests through songs, instrumental music and dance. In times of bereavement, women ease the mourners' pain and grief by consoling them through songs.

The strength of community and political awareness emerge clearly when women assemble to learn new songs and rehearse for an upcoming performance. They converse and debate, with a great deal of interest and awareness, on social, religious and political issues just as men do during public gatherings. The subjects of many of the songs which women compose are inspired not only by their personal experiences and aspirations but also by the social, religious and political issues which they discuss and learn from each other at their gatherings. The world is increasingly becoming a global village and women of

northern Nigeria are more aware of the public roles women play in other societies of the world, especially in Europe and North America.

Women in northern Nigeria now take advantage of the freedom of speech allowed in the context of music performance to openly and publicly express their views, concerns and potentialities. There are indications that women's political and religious messages are being heard, because they are bringing gradual changes in the state, academic institutions and religious institutions for women in northern Nigeria. Many men, as well as the state and religious institutions, are developing positive attitudes towards women. More women are allowed to pursue western education and many are employed in top ranking positions in government ministries, the judiciary and financial institutions. There are some men who feel threatened by the dominant presence and roles which women now play in the home and in the public sector. I hope that women's efforts and determinations may eventually bring them more equal opportunities and fair treatment.



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