Adjoa Frembre Kudoadzi

Wife Seclusion in Niger in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century: Finding the crossroads between tradition and women’s agency

Professor Donna Patterson
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**Wife Seclusion in Niger in the 20th century: finding the crossroads between tradition and women’s agency**

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**Introduction**

Many traditions in Africa restrict the agency of the African woman. While persistent lobbying of gender rights advocates has resulted in the abolition of some of these, the notion of female subordination still remains ingrained in peoples’ mindsets. Women continue to battle against hegemonic traditions and customs which undermine their worth.

In this research paper, I examine one of such customs – specifically, the practice of wife seclusion in Niger in the twentieth century. I first discuss the history of wife seclusion, focusing explicitly on the interplay between Islam and colonialism in developing and sustaining this custom. I go on to unravel how wife seclusion limited women’s social, economic and intellectual power and its broader effects on Nigérien society on the whole.

Finally, I discuss the ways in which women strived to assert their identity and agency in their communities in opposition to this custom. I answer the question, “What implications did the defying of seclusion have?”
Seclusion: An Introduction

Seclusion, also referred to as *purdah*, is a custom common among Muslims not only in Niger but in South Asia, the Middle East, and other places where Islam is prevalent. There were two main forms of seclusion in Niger in the 19th - 20th century. In its strict form, women were totally secluded to the domestic space (Alidou 33). Alidou asserts that this type of seclusion was “particularly prominent among the families of Sufi marabouts, aristocrats, and merchants” mainly in Hausa, Fulani, and Hausa assimilated communities (33). In its more moderate version however, women were allowed to leave their homes but only with the permission of the man of the household. This latter form of seclusion was (and continues to be) more common in urban Niger, “usually across boundaries of ethnicities” (Alidou 33).

According to Roberta A. Dunbar, “seclusion of women in marriage has had an un-even history in Niger: pre-Islamic customs recognized nothing of the kind and women enjoyed complete freedom” (74). The genesis of seclusion, then, in Niger, is proposed to have resulted from Nigerian influence. Anthropologists have estimated that in Nigeria Hausaland, seclusion was first adopted by elites in the latter half of the fifteenth century (Henquinet 59). After the nineteenth century jihad initiated by the creator of the Sokoto Caliphate; Shehu Usman dan Fodio, it became popular ideology that it was improper for women to hold public office, and wife seclusion gained prominence among the general public.
Many Nigerians who fled the jihad settled in the Maradi region of Niger (Henquinet 59). However, it is the Alzarai (a group of wealthy Muslim merchants) who are noted for promoting the spread of wife seclusion when they migrated from Nigeria to central Niger (Henquinet, 59). By the end of the 19th century, wife seclusion had become increasingly popular among the wives of Nigérien sultans, chiefs, and the wealthy (Dunbar 74). Henquinet contends that wife seclusion remained a practice of Maradi elites until devastating droughts in the Sahel in the mid-1900s. These droughts caused labor migration of many Nigériens to Nigeria, where they were imbued with many teachings on wife seclusion and male provision (60).

The French colonial masters welcomed the rapid development of wife seclusion as it conformed to their own ideals about women’s domesticity. In their mindsets, men were the breadwinners of the family while women were the homemakers (Alidou 8). This European gender ideology thus sustained the practice of wife seclusion as it “privileged the recruitment of Muslim men in the paid labor field, while Muslim women were defined as free homemakers” (Alidou 8).

The economic hardships that Niger faced in the mid-1980s also led to a steep increase in wife seclusion. At the time, uranium was Niger’s principal export and was estimated to bring about 88% of export revenue (Heinequet 60). However in 1985, the price of uranium sharply reduced on the international market (Heinequet 60). In that same period, the IMF and World Bank developed stringent Structural Adjustment Policies
(SAPs) that “downsized the [Nigerien] government” and shifted the responsibility for public services from the government to private individuals (Heinequet 60). Nigeriens clung strongly to Islam and its doctrines for comfort and re-assurance in these trying times (Heinequet 60). Heinequet argues that while the West gave Niger minor aid, countries in North Africa and Western Asia strengthened their economic and cultural ties through the building of mosques and increased economic trade (61). These ties therefore “nurtured a sense of Muslim identity in opposition to what [seemed] to be continual Western attacks on the Muslim world” (Heinequet, 61). In accordance with this Muslim identity, Islamic doctrines like wife seclusion were increasingly adopted in Niger.

In a summary, wife seclusion in Niger was (and still is, in certain traditional communities), “related to status, the division of labor, interpersonal dependency, social distance, and the maintenance of moral standards as specified by the society” (Papanek 292). Most researchers concur that wife seclusion was most common among the wealthy as it served as a marker of social and economic status. Conversely, in poor households, Alidou argues that “the severity of the material conditions of families ... [demanded] that men, women, children, and the elderly [were] all actively engaged in seeking a livelihood unencumbered by the cultural limitations of seclusive laws, be they religious or secular” (34). There is however evidence to suggest that even in poor households strict wife seclusion eventually gained prominence as it was believed that Allah would richly reward those who indulged in the pious practice (Henquinet 65).
The Conundrum of Different Lenses:
Wife seclusion – a blessing/curse?

On one hand, wife seclusion appears to have favored women. Women who were strictly secluded were freed from onerous work and enjoyed the pleasure of leisure which Barbara Cooper has likened to the luxury of European women’s “knitting/embroidery” (122). As one secluded woman from the town of Garin Jakka noted, “If your husband sympathizes with you, he will tell you not to work in the fields, go to the well, and collect firewood, [but only] prepare food. You see how he shows sympathy and reduces the work load?” (Henquinet 66).

Many anthropologists have proven that in spite of the dependency at the heart of strict wife seclusion, a large number of secluded women found ways of earning an income (Callaway 440). Callaway elaborates, “[Hausa wives] assert that men are often not impartial, and that disproportionate resources often go to support younger wives and their children. Older women therefore scheme and scrap to earn the extra money to build up their own daughters’ dowries’ or to provide small luxuries for themselves” (440). Women typically prepared food for their daughters to sell in the community since they themselves were not allowed to go out (Callaway 440). In Zinder, secluded women made the equivalent of $100 annually from the sale of prepared foods (Arnould, Henderson 37). They sometimes used their personal income to supplement their

2 Though Callaway refers explicitly to Hausa women in Nigeria in this instance, I have included her findings as a point of reference because of Nigeria’s great influence on the rise of wife seclusion in Niger.
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Husbands’ incomes in times of economic difficulty, or for cultural obligations like gift exchanges during marriage or children’s birth celebrations (Henquinet 76). It could therefore be argued that strict wife seclusion gave women with the best of both worlds: it freed them from laborious tasks such as farming, while giving them the chance to make their own money if they so desired.

For women who were moderately secluded, it was only required that they seek their husbands’ approval to leave their homes. Research has shown that some women repelled this hold on their mobility and visited other households without being noticed since their husbands were away for long periods of time during the day (Heinequet 68). Thus in many people’s mindset, wife seclusion; whether strict or moderate; did not violate women’s rights especially when compared to other customs like female genital mutilation (FGM). While the ability of men to control their wives’ movements definitely undermined their autonomy, perhaps it was instituted to conform to African cultural ideals that maintain that a man has to have authority in his household, or risk public condemnation. Thus the question remains: was wife seclusion meant to be a hegemonic practice, or a way of establishing Nigérien cultural ideals about gender roles?

In trying to answer this complex question, I found it intriguing to note two distinct schools of thought – for some, it would be an abomination to suggest that wife seclusion was anything but hegemonic, while others argued it was a beneficial practice that women enjoyed. The latter argument has been backed with interviews from a number
of secluded women who eagerly supported seclusion. In these cases, I could not help but question the validity of these women’s claims. Were they afraid to go against conventional belief and incur the wrath of their husbands? Had they become resigned to their state and accepted wife seclusion as fate? Kari Henquinet had similar questions and probed into women’s reasons for accepting seclusion in Tchikaji Gajeré and Garin Jakka. Her findings show that majority of women supported the practice either because it was their husbands’ directive or because they believed that it was required of them as Muslim women (see Table 1 below).

**TABLE 1**

Women’s Explanations for Practicing Wife Seclusion³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husband told her to</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman’s well-being</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That’s the way it is/has been</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others do it</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ 36 secluded women in Tchikaji Gajeré and Garin Jakka were interviewed. These responses were freely given and not chosen from a list. Each respondent may have had more than one answer.
While these responses are not representative of all Nigérien secluded women's opinions, it is a clear indication of the compelling religious and cultural reasons linked to most women's acceptance of wife seclusion. Thus, despite the existence of research that suggests otherwise, I believe that wife seclusion was truly a discriminatory practice. My opinion was formed primarily from researching into the perspectives of secluded women themselves and plunging deep beyond the surface of those who claimed to be advocates of wife seclusion. By focusing explicitly on works that amplify the muted\(^4\) voices of secluded women, I have noticed that there are countless ways in which wife seclusion undermined women's agency.

First of all, wife seclusion perpetuated the ideology that women were subordinate to men. A renowned Sufi preacher in Dogondoutchi said in an interview: “[Nigérien] women are in the dark, they know nothing... Secluding [Nigérien] women is the best alternative. They are immature and ignorant; this is why they must be controlled” (Masquelier, xi). Secluded women had no political or religious influence whatsoever in the colonial era. Speaking on this subject, Dunbar maintains that in Zerma and Hausa pre-Islamic societies women once played a greater public role – they carried out “critical functions in the spiritual life of the community or held important political, administrative, and judicial functions” (76). Yet even though these offices were retained by the “nascent Islamic kingdoms of the 19th century, they were suppressed by colonial

\(^4\)The analogy of a ‘muted group’ was coined by Shirley Ardener to describe women “who are so oppressed by men that they constitute a distinct entity self-attuned to their own values and mores” (Callaway 430).
officials who relied on the male hierarchy to govern” (Dunbar, 76). Most secluded women also did not have access to education especially in the early 20th century (Henquinet 77). Additionally, since men had control of the radio stations and held their political discussions outside the home (Heinequet 77), it was very hard for women to make their voices heard in the public sphere.

Another negative impact of wife seclusion (especially in its strict form) was that it forced women to be economically dependent on their husbands. As Callaway powerfully argues, “... control over real economic resources is a necessary pre-requisite for self-esteem for women” (440). Although some women found ways of generating personal incomes, the revenue they earned was not as much as what they could have earned from farming (Henquinet, 71). A woman in Garin Jakka estimated that she made 20 naira ($0.25) profit from selling a batch of fura (a thick millet drink); while on average another woman could make 5 to 10 naira from selling seasonings (Henquinet 71). However, just by selling a bowl of millet alone, a woman could make 310 CFA ($0.58) in the Maradi Region (Henquinet, 71). Indeed, even women who were moderately secluded and could work did not have the same job opportunities as men. Alidou contends that while more job and education prospects became available to women in the 1990s, the job market was heavily gendered and the uranium economy created more jobs for men rather than women (12).
Thus, by forcing able-bodied women to produce below their maximum capacity, wife seclusion boded negatively not only women but also on the already precarious Nigérien economy.

**Women’s Opposition to Wife Seclusion**

In the colonial era, Nigérien women’s resistance to wife seclusion mostly took on subtle forms. Strictly secluded women, for example, engaged in a range of income-earning activities to assert their economic independence. Moderately secluded women also risked leaving their homes without the consent of their husbands. However, it was in the postcolonial era that Nigérien women begun to actively challenge the patriarchal order in Niger and fight for the same political, economic and religious presence Nigérien men had in their communities.

According to Alidou, “the decade of the 1990s ... opened with new internal as well as international Western pressures that forced the country to opt for a democratic multiparty system of government ... In spite of its instability, however, democracy à la Niger opened up fresh avenues for women’s participation and choices” (12). Notable among these was the initiation of women’s and youth political associations, such as the *Association des Femmes du Niger* (AFN) and the Samariya youth association in the mid-1970s (Cooper 169). These groups “symbolize[d] both a [ruling] party’s commitment to modernization and its roots in tradition” (Cooper 176).
In spite of this public show of increased awareness of women's worth, chauvinistic ideologies remained rife in Nigérien society. Alidou notes that the collapse of the uranium market the mid-1980s, coupled with the IMF's Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and other factors plunged the country into “devastating economic depression” (13). “As men began to lose their jobs, their cultural sense of masculinity — as male breadwinners — was also damaged... and they embraced more and more misogynist conceptions of the ‘proper Muslim woman’—a religious housewife” (Alidou 13).

Nigérien women waged resistance to wife seclusion and these limiting perceptions of women in a myriad of different ways. They did this by “(re)defining their identities, sometimes in conformity with the status quo, sometimes against the expectations of the status quo, and at other times by crafting totally independent subversive identities” (Alidou 14). There are three specific ways in which women asserted their agency which I will focus on: courtesanship, increased visibility in political agencies like the AFN, and increased Islamic authority. Each of these was in no way an independent category of its own; typically, each Nigérien woman could identify with more than one of these groups and all these women often forged together to collectively lobby for increased rights of women.

Courtesanship, or kawuranci in Hausa, is a long-standing Nigérien institution that describes the act of a divorced or unmarried woman offering sexual favors to men for
money. Though this appears to have a striking similarity to prostitution, Cooper explains that English-speaking researchers have adopted the term courtesanship rather than prostitution due to “the relative permanence of the sexual relationships involved, the courtship those relationships entail, and the lack of enduring stigma that practitioners encounter” (172).

The interesting dynamics of naming in Niger illustrates that kawuranci is considered as different from prostitution in Nigérien culture. Hausa speakers, for example, when speaking French use the term une femme-libre to describe a courtesan (karuwa) rather than une prostituée. In contrast, streetwalkers from other ethnic groups who do not practice courtesanship are derided and called passe-partout in Maradi (Cooper 172). Dunbar asserts that many women were drawn to courtesanship because, compared to marriage, it provided greater opportunities for “broader social contact and knowledge of and participation in public affairs” (76). Since independence karuwai have “been the ones on the quickest to take up various education programs as participants and teachers” (Dunbar 76).

Nigérien women also demonstrated their immense ability to contribute to a wide scope of political issues through women’s political associations. One of these was Union des Femmes (UFN), which was the women’s wing of the first ruling party after independence: the Parti Progressiste Nigérien (PPN). The UFN demanded that “the government give serious attention to the advancement of women at the national level”
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and that Nigérien women be educated “so that they can soon bring their invaluable assistance to the education of children in the family... and to better child-raising practices and home economics” (Cooper 177). Many kawurai were at the nucleus of the UFN because to the PPN, they exemplified the “modern, worldly woman” (Cooper 176). Cooper clarifies that the kawurai were however held presented by the PPN as “potential wives, not as women who had chosen a lifestyle that rejected or threatened the traditional ideal of marriage” (176). The fact that the UFN built on the stereotype of women as home-makers as an argument for women’s education while the PPN strategically portrayed karuwait in light with Nigérien ideals about women highlights how essential it was for women to conform with certain stereotypes while; ironically enough, they attempted to change these very stereotypes.

The Association des Femmes du Niger (AFN) and the Samariya Youth Association were two other associations that were formed to create awareness of issues concerning women and increase women’s participation in politics. These organizations were formed after Niger’s first president; Hamani Diori; was overthrown in a coup. While the two organizations had similar aims, there was heavy tension between them as the AFN primarily constituted ‘upright’ married women, while the women in the Samariya Youth Association were courtesans or young virgins (Cooper 183). Cooper argues that “it is only by underscoring differences among [these] women that it has been possible for women in this sexually segregated setting to redefine marriage, respectable behavior, and access to external political spaces” (169).
As such, during rallies and public gatherings, Samariya women danced and sang, while AFN women would clap and chant slogans in a dignified manner. “Where Samariya women would be openly flirtatious, AFN women deferred to men without being subservient” (Cooper 185). The AFN disapproved of what they saw as the flirtatious, sexual nature of the Samariya women (Cooper 185). Though both organizations were active at political rallies, they kept their distance “from one other both socially and physically” (Cooper 170). According to Cooper, this internal division was not petty, but it seemed as though for each group of women, “the enemy [was] ‘those other women’” (191). As such, inasmuch as the AFN had many successes such as providing women legal and available contraception (Cooper 180), the fact that these two organizations were fragmented limited the impact that the two could have had if they had worked cohesively.

Lastly, Nigérien women increased their sphere of influence by leading Qur’anic schools (makaranta/madarasa). The fact that women had the title of malama, (religious leader) was an immense accomplishment because men were previously the only authorities on Islam. The malama were very efficient in mobilizing women because they welcomed women no matter their age or their marital status. Alidou contends, “The madarasa has become a space that Nigérien women in urban centers are appropriating not only to advance their understanding of Islam for religious purposes, but more importantly to create a new female space for generating economic revenue and female solidarity” (17). After each service, women would converge to discuss political or social issues or trade
products such as “homemade incense, baby and female clothes” (Alidou 18). According to Alidou, men could not object to their daughters or wives going for meetings because they were centered on reading the Qur’an (18).

The very fact that girls could receive Qur’anic education was an important accomplishment in of itself, as Qur’anic schools were reserved for boys before the mid-1930s (Cooper 123). According to Cooper, “prior to that time women were taught how to pray and how to wash ‘enough so that [they] wouldn’t be haram [unlawful],’ but not enough to read or write or recite special prayers” (123). Before the 1930s, very few young girls used to go to school, if any, just métisse orphans (Cooper 123). However with momentous pressure from groups such as the AFN after independence; education became increasingly available (Cooper 123). The fact that Qur’anic schools were available was very significant because it provided an alternative to Western education (Cooper 124). In their capacities as mallama, women therefore contributed to reducing the effects of neo-colonialism that Western schools subtly promoted.
Conclusion

This research paper has examined the practice of wife seclusion, and highlighted how tradition, Islam and colonialism were three significant vectors that led to the prominence of wife seclusion in the 20th century.

I have shown that though wife seclusion was initially considered to be a sacrilegious practice that Allah richly rewarded, Nigérien women were able to escape its confines and assert their agency. They achieved this in a multiplicity of ways, but for majority of women achieving success in the fight for increased women's agency was directly linked to their ability to show that they still treasured the Islamic faith and the cultural principles that are central to Nigérien culture, such as marriage and the recognition of men as leaders. The mallama, for example, were used as spaces for the economic, political and social mobilization of women, but it was mainly because of their grounding in Islam that men did not pose strong opposition to it.

Though it is commonly perceived that tradition, particularly patriarchal African customs, and women’s agency are two very separate entities, the case of these Nigérien women have proven that it is possible to find a crossroad – a place where the two intersect; albeit with dogged perseverance on the part of women, and a strategic mind that recognizes the fact that it takes skillful maneuvering and re-conceptualization of the things essential to African culture for this to succeed.
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