

Marcande Ceremony: A Space for Subversion and Reclaiming a Voice

Niandou Aissata, Ouaronodima Maina*

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Abdou Moumouni University, Niamey, Niger

Email: aissataniandou@yahoo.fr, *maina.ouaronodima@yahoo.fr

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Abstract

This article analyses a specific arena where women (the friends and relatives of a senior wife) perform songs and dances to “celebrate” the arrival of a new wife in a context where polygamy is culturally and legally allowed. The article analyses four songs to bring out their subversive nature. It also demonstrates how the songs represent a means of reclaiming a voice in a patriarchal context. The songs are divided into two types: the more didactic and less obscene type and the second type, which is more provocative and obscene. In both categories, the woman subverts cultural norms and claims a voice that the culture denies her. In the process of analyzing the current paper, we tentatively use Elaine Showalter’s feminist theory of gynocritics to analyze few songs from this specific place of creativity, in order to see how women subvert patriarchal norms and how they claim a voice to express how they feel on this particular occasion.

Keywords

Marcande Ceremony, Sexuality, Senior Wife, Late Comers or Junior Wives, Patriarchy, Cultural Subversion

1. Introduction

Knowing that African societies are generally patriarchal, there is no doubt that women are either marginalized or exploited. In the process of denouncing the difficulties that women find themselves in, they attempt to use so many strategies. Sometimes they write about their problems and invite us to read and understand the necessity to move towards a correct balance; often, they perform drama to convey their messages. Still, some many more women refer to songs to express their feelings.

The current study is an analysis of a special space of creativity for women. In

this space, reserved for females only, the latter sing and dance to express what they feel on a very special occasion such as when a friend or a relative is having a co-wife. In other words, when the woman's husband is marrying another wife, friends, relatives and neighbors of the senior wife organize a singing and dancing ceremony, to help her deal with the grief of accepting the re-marrying of her husband. We shall use Elaine Showalter's feminist theory of gynocritics to analyze few songs from this specific place of creativity, in order to see how women subvert patriarchal norms and how they claim a voice to express how they feel on this particular occasion. Four songs will be examined one by one to reveal the messages each one entails.

2. Context of the Ceremony

...before feminism became a movement with a global political agenda, African women both "theorized" and practiced what for them was crucial to the development of women, although no terminology was used to describe what these women were actively doing, and are still practicing, on a day-to-day basis. *Gender in African Women's Writing* (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: p. 10).

The argument made in the above quotation applies very well to what women do in the *marcande* arena. *Marcande* is a specific highly subversive ceremony in Zarma tradition for a particular occasion. It is a woman's space of dance in which the woman feels free from all norms and conventions of shyness, restraint, shame and *pudeur*. The ceremony is organized by the friends, relatives, and neighbors of a senior wife whose husband is taking a second wife. Through this "celebration" female friends and relatives come to help the senior wife overcome the difficult situation of accepting to share her husband with another woman.

As it is commonly said, in the culture, the friends come "to press a stone against her broken heart", that is to help her support the grief. Generally, if the senior wife happens to be pregnant while the husband takes the second wife; the baby born from the senior wife is nicknamed Tondi (Stone) with reference to the stone she had to press on her heart. This shows that it is not happily that women accept polygamy, even in the old days.

Seemingly, the *marcande* ceremony can be seen as a way to force the woman to accept polygamy because the senior wife has to organize this feast. In Zarma communities, women are taught to keep in their mind that experiencing polygamy is always a possibility, no matter how much their husband loves them. This way, when the time comes, they will be able to cope with the situation in dignity. During the ceremony, the senior wife stays in her house while other women, her friends and relatives, on her behalf, express their frustration openly, in the songs and dances they perform. Moreover, culturally, people recognize that a married man taking another wife is always hurting his senior wife. The husband must make up for the hurt by offering a present to the first wife. The tremendous efforts many women have always made, from the old days to now,

to prevent their husband to take a second wife, testify to the complexity of the situation. However, occasionally one might find in the culture some women who urge their husband to remarry for some reasons; but this is not our concern in this study.

The songs have been collected from two women: the first is about thirty years old and currently lives in Niamey, the capital city of Niger and the second is a much older woman from a village called Nazey. She passed away in January 2023. They happen to have the same first name, Haysa. Because of the nature of the songs, I decided not to mention their full names. I refer to them as Haysa Niamey and Haysa Nazay. The songs from Haysa Niamey were from an interview at a wedding ceremony that occurred on November 12, 2022 in a neighborhood in Niamey. The ones by the older woman were recorded at the woman's home on October 10, 2020.

3. Terminology Issue and Theoretical Framework

The pieces under study do not fit neatly in the genres of literate cultures. Therefore, there is a need to explain the choice of referring to them as songs. In fact, naming and finding the appropriate translation, for pieces of oral literature in foreign languages, is not always an easy task for researchers. Even for the umbrella term, oral literature, scholars often have divergent views. In other words, they continue to argue about terminology issues.

In his book, *African Oral Literature—Background, Character, and Continuity*, Okpewho (1992) discusses the term oral literature. While scholars such as Okpewho (1992) and Jahn (1969) feel comfortable with the term, Walter J. Ong rejects it. Ong argues that “there is no such a thing as ‘oral literature’” and sees using this expression as a way of downgrading oral cultures (Walter, 1977: p. 146). In Ong's view, the term literature means by essence writing and we can never divest it from its association with what is written. He prefers to use the expression oral performances instead.

In this paper, even though we refer to the pieces under study as songs, in reality, they have a dual aspect, namely singing and dancing. The performers sing and dance at the same time during the performances. In Zarma language, the pieces are called *marcande dooni*-songs of *marcande*. In the culture, people understand that *marcande* is a dancing celebration at which women sing and dance.

Okpewho (1992) pointed out that many researchers have written about various African oral performances. This interest in African oral art by scholars can be traced back to the end of the 19th century when European researchers started collecting pieces of this art across the continent (5 - 6). But despite this interest, not much has been devoted specifically to the lore of West African women. Women's presence in African oral culture is so prominent that it deserves more than being referred to in generic books. Fortunately, recently, some scholars have started to deal with women's verbal art from West Africa. Among

groundbreaking authors who worked on women's verbal art from geographical spaces of Niger and Nigeria, one can list [Hale & Sidikou \(2013\)](#), [Sidikou \(2001\)](#), [Coles & Mack \(1991\)](#), to name only a few.

As many African cultures are based on a gender division of almost everything, it is important that critics study the spaces of women's creativity in order to acknowledge the female dimension of African oral cultural spaces of creativity such as the *marcande* space. There is a lot yet to be discovered and analyzed especially from a feminist stance. In this study, the theoretical framework through which the songs are analyzed is gynocritics, a branch of feminism that focuses on women's works. According to Elaine Showalter, the critic who coined the word,

Gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, all of which have developed hypotheses of a female subculture including not only the ascribed status, and the internalized constructs of femininity, but also the occupations, interactions, and consciousness of women ([Showalter, 1985: p. 131](#)).

The objective of the study is to examine the role this verbal art plays in the society, in women's lives, and the messages they convey, as most of them are not only artistic and entertaining, but they are highly didactic. First, we will analyze the two didactic songs and then the second type with obscene lyrics.

4. Analysis of the Songs

Marcande songs are specific because they happen only in the above mentioned context. As the critic [Sidikou \(2001: p. 50\)](#) points out, "Outside the *marchande* context, women refuse to sing those songs for researchers." It is because the language used in the lyrics is usually very obscene and unacceptable outside the arena of *marcande*. The songs are divided into two categories. The first type is composed of didactic lyrics meant to advise women. The second type is composed of obscene lyrics full of cursing expressions, describing intercourse and male and female sexual organs. We shall analyze four songs: two from the didactic type and two of the second category. These songs are chosen because they convey two major messages of *marcande dooni*, namely communication of advice to women and expression of revolt against patriarchal constraint.

The two examples from the didactic type are the following songs:

4.1. Song 1 by Haysa Nazay

Feetu, feetu
A feetu
Ay gab'ay man feetu
Ciibo, ciibo, ciibo
Koyciiya ma hanga suuru
Sataray ma hanga suuru
Zama suuru no ga boro no lakkal

Zanka kayna kan te wacce
 Kala gnawo ma koy hin suuru
 Kala gnaway ma ganday naanu
 Feetu feetu (descriptive of crying aloud) Feel like crying out loud?
 Go ahead
 I feel like crying out loud!
 Ciibo, ciibo, ciibo (mouth sound to go with the dance)
 Young woman, take patience
 Young women, take patience
 A young woman getting a co-wife
 Her mother has to take patience
 Her aunts have to press her chest (unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine)

4.2. Song 2 by by Haysa Nazay

Title: Wande kaayna da Wande beeri – Senior wives vs. New Comers

Wande kayna ya fulle no
 Wande kayna ya fulle no
 Irkoy ma saara ka fulle ga
 Wande kayna waliya futay
 Waliya kande jiiri no a man goro
 Hay wonde beeri
 Bon buunay follo no
 I kande nin
 I kande ay
 Moo to watay?
 A late comer is worthless (x 2)
 Let her be cursed
 A late comer is the bad stork
 It announces the season
 But it never stays
 Are these first wives crazy?
 You were brought
 I was brought
 So what do you boast about?

The first song entitled *Zanka kayna kan te wacce* is in the form of a dialog between a young woman and an older one. The younger woman whose husband is getting married says she feels like crying out loud for people to hear. The older one advises her not to do so. During the performance, the dancers express how the young woman feels in a form of revolt such as rejecting the patriarchal call for suffering in dignity. The lyrics convey that the young woman getting a co-wife feels like expressing her grief and she says it. But as stated above, a wiser older voice advises her not to do so. Rather, she should suffer silently and be pa-

tient because a woman should be strong enough in order not to exteriorize her suffering. She should show that polygamy is bearable. However, a wiser older voice advises her not to do so. Rather, she should suffer silently and be patient because a woman should be strong enough in order not to exteriorize her suffering. She should show that polygamy is bearable. However, the fact that the young woman says what she feels is indeed subversive, as she is not expected to do so in a culture where women are taught to restrain and control themselves by being strong and patient. The older women are the ones who pass these virtues onto younger women and this is exactly what the wise voice says in the last three lines of the song.

The *marcande* space is also a locus for conflict between first wives and “late comers” (any woman who is not a first wife; she could be second, third, or fourth, the maximum according to Islamic principles). During the ceremony, women (senior wives and late comers) produce lyrics to attack each other. The critic Mounkaila (2008: p. 61) refers to this type of song as *duos de remariage* (61) because the first wives and the late comers attack each other at the remarriage of the man.

It is a tradition for the in-laws to bring the bride to greet the senior wife before she is taken to her husband. The people of the new bride, who accompany the bride to greet the senior wife, always go with a *griotte* (praise singer). Thus when the *griotte* (praise singer) announces to the guests of the senior wife that the bride and her delegation have arrived, the relatives and friends of the senior wife welcome them in the following lyrics of the first stanza of song 2:

A late comer is worthless (x 2)
Let her be cursed
A late comer is the bad stork
It announces the season
But it never stays
The delegation of the bride answers:
Are these first wives crazy?
You were brought
I was brought
So what do you boast about?

These *duos* are supposed to be pacific even though from time to time it might turn into a real conflict. This might be due to the changes that occur with time. The reactions of women in the past were not the same as nowadays. In fact, nowadays, some senior wives refuse to organize a *marcande* ceremony when their husband is taking another wife. Some might go as far as refusing the visit that the bride pays to the senior wife, before she is taken to her husband. Thus, they go against the patriarchal requirement of the culture.

The second category of *marcande* songs is composed of short songs that are highly obscene and can occur only in the *marcande* space as stated above. In the

Zarma culture, the kind of language used is forbidden outside its context. What is amazing is that during the celebration, women that are labeled “respectable”, that one will never think can utter the obscenities will say them and dance. The feminine crowd becomes like an unleashing of women rejecting all norms of *pudeur*, shame and restraint. The following examples (the least obscene from my recordings) illustrate the kind of lyrics produced in this specific space.

4.3. Song 3 by Haysa Niamey

Mulikutuk a jenaway
 Ni taamu calle
 M’an kaday
 Ni zara calle
 M’an kaday
 Wokan kande ay
 A go waani
 D’ay man duwa
 Ay ga ye fuyan
 Mulikutuk a jenaway (descriptive of a big penis)
 I did not come
 For your pair of shoes
 I did not come
 For your piece of wrapper
 What has brought me
 Is different
 If I do not get it
 I’ll go back home

4.4. Song 4 by Haysa Niamey

Bonayze! da sekara gangi kurnye!
 Kalay hay
 Kalay naasu
 A man ka
 Kalay di a na saako zimma ganda
 Kalay di a na fuula ka ga sorku
 Kalay di a na kwayo ka ga sorku
 Kalay di a na muuduno ka ga sorku
 Kalay di a na wangalmay cabay se
 Kalay mo na koppu gnogobb cabe a se
 Bloody hell! What a pain to be the wife of a *sekara gaji man!*
 I had my baby
 I gained some weight
 He is still not back
 Then I saw him drop his heavy bag

Then he removed and hung his hat
Then he removed and hung his blouse
Then he removed and hung his trousers
Then he showed me *wangalmay*
(Descriptive of an erected penis)
In my turn, I showed him *koppu gnogob*
(Descriptive of the private part of a fat or heavy woman)

This song is a complain about being the wife of a *sekara ganji man*, i.e a male migrant who stays away from his country for more than a year. In the song, the woman claims the right to enjoy physical sex, not just for the sake of reproduction, the acceptable reason. She asserts that she has not come to the house of her husband for clothes and shoes only. She claims that she has come for something else, without naming it. However, there is no doubt that the something else stands for sex.

In many patriarchal cultures, women are not expected to discuss sexual enjoyment in normal circumstances. They are not expected to raise their voice about that because they are supposed to be good women who cannot discuss sexual pleasure. Commenting on communication about sex among South African women, Lambert argues “Young South African women face significant socio-cultural restrictions in the arena of sexuality, with an emphasis on maintaining modest behavior” (quoted in (Sullivan et al, 2006: p. 101)).

This is even more valid in the cultures of Niger where traditional expectations are mixed with Islamic principles. However, despite these restrictions, women do create their own spaces where they can be free from restrictions. The *marcandé* space is one such arena as probably can be found in many cultures where women are denied rights and voices to talk about sexual drives.

Although Zarma culture does not allow women to express sexual desire openly, women have their own sub-culture where they talk about sexuality, and sexual education. It is understandable to hear women produce such lyrics, as it is common to see men neglect the senior wife sexually because they have taken a new bride. When the woman finds herself in such a situation, it is difficult for her to complain because of her sense of *pudeur*. In fact, in the culture, there are many “funny” stories that express how a woman has summoned her husband to the chief’s court, and her incapacity or difficulties to reveal the problem, once she finds herself in front of the male court members.

Song 4 comes from the voice of a woman whose husband is a *sekara ganji* man, meaning a man who spends more than a year when he goes out of the country to make money. In the Zarma communities, generally after the harvest, men go abroad; many migrants generally go to Cote d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast) for trade. This is highly appreciated by mothers and wives as when the men come back they bring them presents. Men who do not go abroad to “look for money” are criticized. They are referred to as *jawize*, a term which means those who

spend the cold season at home.

But in this song, we hear the voice of a woman who complains because her man has left for too long. She raises her voice to denounce sexual neglect by a husband who goes away for too long. Often when the man has many wives, he might go with the preferred one and leave the others in the village, despite the fact that Islam imposes on polygamous men equal treatment of their wives.

The culture being patriarchal, it is a shame for a woman to say openly that she is sexually neglected. As Otu (2016: p. 42) rightly argues, “Women are conditioned to be ashamed of expressing their sexuality, of exercising their sexual rights; most women have general sexual guilt feelings or submit to the psychology of sex-negation.” (42) This observation is valid for Zarma culture because it reflects how women are expected to behave sexwise.

In the *marcande* space, the woman is free to express herself on forbidden issues. In song 4, after denouncing the fact that she has been neglected because her husband has left without her, when he comes back the woman rejoices about meeting the man sexually again. During the song the women dance obscenely and imitate the eagerness with which the man takes off his clothes and the action of the man and his wife woman having intercourse.

5. Conclusion

As this article shows, the *marcande* space is really a special place for subversion and reclaiming a voice for the woman in a patriarchal society where women face several taboos and rejections. The woman who has no voice to discuss sexuality frees herself in this circle. Thanks to *marcande* women remove all obstacles related to shyness, self-retention and shame which are more than means of regulating society; these values of *pudeur*, shyness self-retention are also patriarchal means for the control and oppression of women. In the *marcande* space women fully assert themselves and pour out their hearts content about the oppressive nature of their culture as we examined in the selected songs.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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