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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barbara Cooper. *Marriage in Maradi: Gender and Culture in a Hausa Society in Niger, 1900-1989.* Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1997. xlix + 228 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-435-07413-5.

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Published on H-Africa (July, 1997)

History of Marriage

History of Marriage Barbara Cooper tells us in the introduction to this book that she did not intend to write a history of marriage. She was interested in writing a gendered history, but data collected from her informants convinced her that marriage was the central concern for women. Much of what she produced flows from her method. In Maradi, Cooper used the local women's association to set up interviews with women in different parts of the city and one rural area.

Though she did the necessary archival research, her analysis flows from the interviews, both individual and collective, that she conducted. The result is as much anthropology as history. It is critical, imaginative and insightful, informed by a good sense of her data and its limitations. Her method also imposed limitations on her. To get and keep the confidence of the women, she had to avoid spending time either with other groups of women or with men.

She develops a series of arguments throughout the book. The first is that the state tends to be irrelevant, and where relevant, the unintended results of policies are more important than the intended ones. In particular, women prefer using informal agents of conflict resolution rather than going to court. This, however, was often a tactical decision.

Second, she argues that the decline of slavery led to attempts to replace slave labour with that of junior wives, whose labour was exploited by both their husbands and the senior women. The one difference is that women could divorce their husbands and used divorce and the threat of divorce to create some space for themselves.

Third, she describes a transformation of *gandu*, the family work group. Traditionally, it was an extended family unit, in which *gandu* production was used to pay taxes, provide seed, meet rainy season food needs, and provide a reserve. Today, the *gandu* is usually restricted to the nuclear family, but its product is used to feed the family throughout the year and to provide for some of the household's cash needs. Women and younger male dependants have their private plots, but their access to land and to new technology is contested. While the family head provides more of the food needs of the group, women are usually more dependant and more vulnerable.

The position of women is also very much shaped by the growth and increasing strictness of Islam. She analyszes the way women are influenced by different degrees of seclusion. One unfortunate result of this increasing seclusion is that her access to the most secluded, the wives of successful merchants, was limited. Having established the dependance and vulnerability of women, Cooper is at her best in analyzing their strategies.

First, they can use or threaten divorce. Women often sought divorces. Most girls have no choice about their first marriage, but they often seek divorce and thenceforth, negotiate the terms of their subsequent marriages. Second, they can often get better conditions in marriage to soldiers and strangers, which is called "soldier marriage." Such women were often better off and usually had the money to engage in entrepreneurial activities. They often travelled with their husbands, and thus, had a greater experience of the world and of the state. Third, they can often better themselves through education and government employment. Educated women sometimes choose informal relationships over marriage rather than compromise their freedom. Those with jobs certainly have greater freedom of action. Fourth, and probably most important, changes in land and inheritance law have made it easier for women to acquire land either in town or country, though generally it is urban women who do this.

Cooper examines each of these situations. She also looks at the way women look at past and present and they way they relate to each. In an analysis of wedding gift exchange, she underlines the importance of social in-

vestment. She also looks at the involvement of women in the public sphere through the women's associations, which were her point of entry. Through all of this, what emerges is picture of female vulnerability. Dependant on fathers, brothers, and husbands, they have limited room to manouver if they are to maintain some control over their own lives. That room to manouver is further constrained by the increasing strictness of Islam. In spite of this, women maintain a degree of autonomy.

All of this is done with considerable skill. This is a major contribution to a subject that is worthy of further attention, but I feel that some things are missing. First, this study cries for a fuller development of other family relations. A number of Cooper's informants seek divorces in order to be near children of earlier marriages. Relations with children are clearly important to them. They are probably the most important source of security for an elderly woman, but these are not ever really analyzed.

Second, there is no discussion of sexuality, intimacy or affection. I counted three times in whole book that the this was a variable in any discussion. Cooper is probably right that for a young woman, relations with her co-wives are often more important than with her husband. Certainly, many divorces seem to have been rooted in conflict with co-wives, but I think there is something missing. The problem may well be that this is what her informants wanted to talk about, but once again, there are hints in a number of the narratives she cites that Hausa marriage was not a purely economic relationship.

Third, there is a problem with historical depth. Students of women's history have been very innovative in their use of interview techniques, for example, life histories, but these techniques often have their limitations. One is that there are sometimes few chronological markers. A second is that there are few ways of seeking external confirmation. This is especially true where the scholar cannot interview other informants without jeopardizing a priveleged relationship.

She has used court records only for the very recent period. These may not be available. They were generally quite limited in French West Africa, but where available, they are often a good mirror of social change. Cooper argues that women preferred to avoid the formal court system, but this was a tactical choice. Informal agents of conflict resolution were more flexible, but this was a tactical decision. She also did not use mission sources. Perhaps she saw the missions as marginal to a Muslim area, but they were concerned with family life and their experiences often provide a window into an early period only penetrable through hazy of memories.

In the long run, women's history will be important as it shapes our understanding of larger historical processes. Historians of women have moved into areas which are difficult to research. Africanists do not have the rich sources for family history available for Europe. Cooper's research is an important contribution to our understanding of marriage and to the methodology of studying it. It will contribute to a better understanding of how family relations have changed over time.

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Citation: Martin A. Klein. Review of Cooper, Barbara, *Marriage in Maradi: Gender and Culture in a Hausa Society in Niger, 1900-1989.* H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1108

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