BOOK NOTES

Ousseina Alidou, *Engaging modernity: Muslim women and the politics of agency in postcolonial Niger*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. Pp. xxi, 235. Hb. $45.00.

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Challenging conventional discourse about African Muslim women as passive victims of religious, ethnic, economic, and cultural oppression, Alidou analyzes the lives and discourse of three prominent women of Niger. She focuses on these women's agency, understood as a capacity to realize one's aspirations in spite of obstacles. More broadly, she discusses the meaning of modernity for Muslim women in Niger today. Alidou is self-reflexive as she incorporates her own voice in the study – the voice of a Muslim female linguist and cultural critic from Niger who now resides and teaches in the United States. The book's qualitative data comprise Niger-based participant observations, interviews, and literary texts (poems, songs, fairytale). A chapter on Niger's political economy of education is supplemented with quantitative sociological data on educational achievement.

The book is divided into three two-chapter parts. Part 1 analyzes "the interplay between women, agency, literacy, and epistemological traditions" (27). Chap. 1 introduces one ethnographic subject – leading female Nigerian Muslim scholar Malama A'ishatu – to illustrate how the democratization of the 1990s created political and cultural space that allowed women to situate "their religious voices in the public arena" (34) and "to create an alternative modernity" (56). Chap. 2 analyzes the impact of the political economy of education on women's lives, examines how Niger's indigenous, Islamic, and Western legacy influenced women's orality/literacy and education, and discusses Islamic-based alternative educational opportunities created by women as means of empowerment.

In Part 2, Alidou examines performance and folklore as realms of expression of new identities among women. Those interested in language use and discourse analysis will find this section interesting. Chap. 3 offers a critical discourse analysis of Alidou's interviews with a female public performer, Hajia Habsu Garba, and her songs. Chap. 4 examines Habsu's public narrative of a fairytale as an example "of a subversive counterdiscourse in the arena of female resistance through the performing arts" (27).

Part 3 discusses women's political struggle in times of ideological or military conflict. Chap. 5 examines how, because of socioeconomic and political instability in the 1990s Niger, "different aspects of Islam in the urban landscape are appropriated and mobilized, especially by women" (150) to position themselves as agents in the discursive spaces of Islam and the nation. Based on the life story of a third ethnographic subject, chap. 6 examines how the Tuareg Rebellion redefined the notion of womanhood on local and national scales.

Alidou partly succeeds at demonstrating how Niger Muslim women's agencies exemplify their new meanings of modernity – a theoretical claim presented at the beginning of the book. Although she initially emphasizes a broader context of political, economic, historical, ethnic, and cultural power relations in Niger, her primary data come overwhelmingly from the social biographies of her three subjects, and the links between these micro-level data and the larger social realities are not always specified. The biggest limitation of the book is methodological: the author's reliance on three subjects who, despite some differences, are highly atypical of Niger's Muslim women. Two of the three women are of noble background and part of the urban elite, and the third is an important national political figure. It is unclear how their stories represent the struggle (and agency) of average Muslim women in Niger. Finally, the reader is left to wonder how the researcher/subject (power) relationship is affected by the subjects' close proximity to power and by the author's personal friendship with them.

Overall, the book is more social theory- and cultural studies-oriented rather than linguistically oriented, and it will be useful to scholars in cultural studies, women studies, African studies, or Islamic studies.

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Christopher J. Hall, *An introduction to language and linguistics: Breaking the language spell*. London/New York: Continuum, 2005. Pp. xvii, 344. Pb. $24.95.

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Part 1, "Magic," introduces language and linguistics. The "Language Spell" is Hall's metaphor for human beings' misperception of the nature of language as primarily social. The insights of (generative) linguistics hold the key to breaking the Spell, by revealing the "essential biological reality" of the "language faculty" (xii). The book opens with a discussion of language and thought ("mentalese"), where terms like "mystery" (10), "miracle" (11), "cognitive magic" (14), and the assignment of increasingly volitional features to the Spell (e.g., 26) set the tone.

Part 2, "Words," addresses naming, word acquisition, lexicography, phonology (four pages, 116–20), lexical semantics, and spelling. Part 3, "Grammar," turns to word formation, X-bar syntax, and pragmatics. Language acquisition "From DNA to discourse community" (chap. 8) rounds off this section. Part 4, "Babel," deals with sociolinguistic issues such as language diversity, dialects, education, and multilingualism, as well as with language biology and evolution.

Each of the 11 chapters ends with a "More information" section, offering bibliographic and online references. The book contains a glossary, a section detailing sources, a bibliography, and a two-part subject/scholar index.

There is a major typo (162) where "coda" and "rime" are swapped in a syllable structure diagram. There are several less accurate formulations, such as confusion between compositionality and headedness (165), between syntax and language itself as meaning-sound mediator (e.g. 180, 231), the statement that phonemes perform morphological conversion functions (134), and that pronouns "can substitute a whole noun phrase" (183) yet be "marked as NP" ("noun phrase" and "NP" are used interchangeably).

Hall's style is generally engaging, though discursive and often casual, fluctuating between a pleasant Spell-bound causerie and dense argumentation involving nativist-generativist tenets. One example: "Syntactic knowledge, perhaps including scary stuff like this part of Chomsky's 'Binding Principle' for pronoun interpretation, is invoked by all human beings many times a day, with as little ado as sneezing. It is only the Language Spell that prevents us from seeing the Binding Principle as part of who we are as users of language" (155). It is therefore unclear how seriously to take statements like "It's not yet possible to localize Swahili inflectional morphology or Spanish politeness strategies in the grey matter of the human brain" (272), offered as conclusion to the current "misty" view from neurolinguistics about human language.

The book's avowed purpose is to plead for universal reconciliation among human beings through the study of (generative) linguistics, which "can help us live a little better as individuals and members of local and global communities" (297). Data are taken from English, and occasionally from Spanish. Discussion keeps to conventional nativist-generativist discourse, with exactly the same arguments based on exactly the same English examples used throughout the past 40 years. Hall's vindication of the "armchair science" (194) associated with nativism-generativism proceeds through familiar non-empirical claims about the "breakneck speed" of children's language acquisition "without explicit cues in the input" (188), the "astonishing fact of multilingualism in individuals" (212), and the equation of "minds" with "brains" (282). These claims in turn substantiate Hall's endorsement of his chosen school of thought to exorcise the Spell.

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