

Queen Sarraounia and the Civilizing Mission: Perspectives on the Politics of Memory

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“What is there in common between the University of Florida, Niger and Jamaica?” is a riddle that Leonardo Villalon proposed to me two years ago on my verandah in Niamey. The answer, which he had found on the University’s website, had everything to do with my family’s itinerary and nothing to do with research. Today, though, the polyvalent answer would be “Sarraounia” (a keyword of my research over the last ten years), Fulbright, and the Center for African Studies.

So, who is Sarraounia? Used generically, Sarraounia (Hausa for “queen” or “female chief”) may designate various functions of female leadership. Among the Azna of Lougou, Bagagi, and elsewhere—predominantly animist until recently—this title refers especially to a female lineage that held noncentralized political and religious authority. But religious authority has long become the only remaining, and contested, prerogative of the Sarraounia. History books, which are far too few, largely ignore the queens, priestesses, and female chiefs of the recent past, thus depriving Niger of powerful national female role models. The function of this peculiar religious, and formerly political, leadership is inscribed in the social, cultural, and political world of the Azna, whose worldview, based on cults of nature and its spirits, recognizes the crucial complementarity of the male and female elements of the cosmos and of society.

In Niger today, the title Sarraounia, generally treated as a name, conjures up images of Sarraounia Mangou, the most famous of the Sarraounias, thanks to her resistance to French domination, led by Captain Paul Voulet, at the head of the Mission Voulet Chanoine. My current research, funded by the Fulbright Senior Scholar Program and hosted by the Center for African Studies at the University of Florida, is a transcultural and multi-genre comparative approach to the reinvention/representation of postcolonial memory examined within a specific, history-inspired cultural constellation, seen



from the perspectives of both the colonized and the colonizer.

This research is taking in a book project entitled: *Queen Sarraounia and the Civilizing Mission. Perspectives on the Politics of Memory*. This work aims at contributing to the general debate on narrative, history writing, myth-making and identity construction in the local and global arenas. It looks specifically at how the historical narrative, imbued with epic intentions, originating in the colonizing as well in the colonized space, explores and expunges the objective of amnesia of an empire’s unacknowledged and silenced violence. The book describes and analyzes what happens when the fires of the counter-project of remembering, in the forms of the novel, the film, and the field (popular and official representation and cultural practices and productions), catch and grow into a constellation of myth and counter-myth as African and French writers, film makers,

and others take up positions on either side of the postcolonial fence in an oppositional creation of heroes/anti-heroes and an intertextual discourse on the meanings of power, knowledge and history. The work brings attention to a deliberately erased page of colonial history of the final years of the 19th century and its postcolonial local and global, narrative and ideological, creative and discursive, rural and urban repercussions and extensions. It focuses on the little-known region of the Nigérien Sahel and foregrounds unexplored arenas of globalization, identity construction, gender, power, and religion.

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