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Review of *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya: Leadership, Representation and Social Change* by Ousseina D. Alidou, and: *Bargaining for Women's Rights: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy* by Alice J. Kang."

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**Book Review:**

**Ousseina D. Alidou . *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya: Leadership, Representation and Social Change* .** Madison : The University of Wisconsin Press , 2013 . xviii + 225 pp. List of Illustrations. Acknowledgments. Abbreviations. Glossary. Notes. References. Index. \$26.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0299294649 .

**Alice J. Kang . *Bargaining for Women's Rights: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy* .** Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press , 2015 . xvi + 241 pp. Acknowledgments. Abbreviations. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$27.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0816692187 .

One of the most eye-opening parts of Ousseina D. Alidou's *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya: Leadership, Representation and Social Change* is the author's description of the lone Muslim woman serving in Kenya's Parliament. The MP chooses to wear styles of West African clothing that neutralize differences between Muslims and Christians, rejecting more conspicuously Muslim styles such as the Swahili *buibui* or the Arab Gulf-inspired *abaya*. This instance of "dress politics" (103) reveals a pan-African consciousness, on the one hand, and a Kenya-specific sartorial adaptation on the other: Muslim women are a minority in Kenya, and must present a secular public image if they hope to form winning coalitions in government. Alidou hence offers an important lesson for scholars who study Muslim women in contemporary Africa: gender and religion are transnational identities, but "being a Muslim in a predominantly Muslim area has different implications for Muslim women and men than being a Muslim in a predominantly non-Muslim area" (103). This is an implicit invitation to read *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya* alongside literature on regions of Africa where Muslim women are in the religious majority.

Enter *Bargaining for Women's Rights: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy* by Alice J. Kang, who studies women in the context of Niger, a country whose population is more than 90 percent Muslim. She thus helps to complete the story that Alidou begins in Kenya, where only about 11 percent of people are Muslim. Reading these books together is not an obvious choice, given the authors' distant academic backgrounds (Kang is a political scientist; Alidou a theoretical linguist). Nevertheless, the pair of texts facilitates a fuller understanding of Islam and women in Africa than either text could do alone.

*Bargaining for Women's Rights* centers on the puzzle of why governments adopt some women's rights policies and reject others. Kang concludes that the adoption of women's rights policies is more likely when (1) women's activists mobilize, (2) conservative activists fail to mobilize, and (3) the legislature does not exercise its autonomy to amend or reject women's proposals. The argument is almost too simple, sidestepping the messier search for exogenous explanations. Specifically, readers might still wonder what explains variations in popular mobilization or legislative autonomy. Kang extracts hints from her fourteen months of fieldwork and 133 interviews with diverse stakeholders in debates over women's rights in Niger. For instance, she proposes that conservatives seemed less prone to mobilize against female activists when women-friendly policies were "thinkable," meaning framed as democratic reforms. For the most part, though, Kang seems uninterested in systematically exploring the roots of her independent variables. Overreach she does not.

The major contribution of Kang's project lies not in the argument, but rather in a meticulous account of Nigerien political history from colonial times to the present. Niger is one of the most understudied countries among scholars writing about Africa in English. Its Francophone status cannot be the sole reason; studies on Senegal abound. Instead, one can speculate that Niger's marginality in the literature is a symptom of economic and geographic marginality. Niger is among the world's poorest countries, landlocked with a harsh Sahelian climate.

Kang provides an overdue corrective to studies that omit Niger or lump it into the rest of Francophone West Africa. In chapter 1 she reveals that the French colonial policy toward Niger entailed propping up chiefs and local Islamic legal traditions in order to rule by proxy rather than export administrators from Paris. This pattern stood in stark contrast to France's modus operandi in coastal colonies and belies the conventional wisdom about clear-cut distinctions between French "direct rule" and British "indirect rule." In short, Niger is not Senegal, despite numerous studies suggesting otherwise. Careful attention to history sets Kang apart from political scientists who tend to be unapologetically presentist.

History lessons lend more than novelty. Kang also makes a convincing case that understanding Niger's particular colonial experience is essential to understanding the situation of Muslim women in Niger today. Because the colonial state enshrined patriarchal forms of Islam in common law, women have had to mount social movements for challenging norms that blocked them from holding political office or having a say in family matters like divorce and child custody. This means that the transition to multiparty politics had different consequences for Niger than it did for other African countries that also democratized in the 1990s. Expanded civil liberties allowed women to form associations, yet they also created autonomy for parliamentarians

to modify a gender quota bill so as to reduce the number of seats in the legislature reserved for women. Policymakers who hope to promote democracy can learn from Kang's conclusion that democracy does not benefit everyone equally. Nonacademic audiences will furthermore appreciate the book's clear organization and overall lack of jargon.

Alidou similarly places the contradictions of democratization front and center in *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya*. Her principal goal is to examine how Kenyan Muslim women leaders have taken advantage of political spaces that opened up during liberal reforms of the late twentieth century. Multiparty competition created unprecedented opportunities for Muslim women in Kenya to engage in political life, and occasionally led male Muslim leaders to relax their patriarchal positions in an effort to maximize Muslim representation in government. Simultaneously, being a religious minority in a majoritarian system compelled some Muslim women to deemphasize their religious identity in an effort to gain the broad-based support necessary to compete in the political arena. This tension is often apparent in the six interviews with Muslim women that make up most of the book.

Alidou is forthright about the fact that her subjects do not represent all Kenyan Muslim women. The women telling their stories are Western-educated community leaders whom the author met through personal networks of friends and family. This makes some of her claims sound farfetched—for example, the assertion that an analysis of interviews with only two Muslim female parliamentarians “reveals that the 1990s democratization process opened up doors of opportunity for women in general and for Muslim women in particular” (114). However, such generalizations are few. Before readers accuse Alidou of selecting too small a sample on the dependent variable, they should remember that Alidou does not set out to explain empirical variation; rather, she aims to describe, interpret, and theorize modes of leadership among women of an elite subpopulation of Kenyan society.

Instead of criticizing Alidou's book for the subjects it omits, one can praise the book for the subjects it includes—namely, men whom Alidou recognizes as pivotal allies or opponents of her female protagonists. Kang likewise interviews some male activists, bureaucrats, and politicians alongside numerous women for *Bargaining for Women's Rights*. Both authors thus exemplify a women-in-society approach that serves as a model for future studies on gender in Africa and beyond.

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