

BOOK REVIEW

Hadiza Moussa. *Yearning and Refusal: An Ethnography of Female Fertility Management in Niamey, Niger*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 238 pp. Index. \$32.99. Paper. ISBN: 9780197662113.

In the heart of Niger, where tradition and modernity collide, Hadiza Moussa's *Yearning and Refusal* emerges as a groundbreaking ethnographic exploration of female fertility management. From the outset, Moussa captivates readers with a provocative quote that lays bare the cultural fusion of sexuality and marriage: "God codified sexuality for married people. For those who aren't married, this is an issue that doesn't concern them. It's because of marriage that God gave men sexuality—without marriage, no sexuality" (7). This stark declaration sets the stage for a deep dive into Niamey's complex world of reproductive politics. In this world, the most intimate aspects of women's lives are subject(ed) to intense, pervasive social scrutiny and control.

Leveraging a rich tapestry of extensive interviews, observations, and her own lived experiences, Moussa illuminates the profoundly personal and culturally embedded realities of infertility, contraception, and abortion in a patriarchal, pro-natalist context where women's reproductive capacities are subject to intense social scrutiny and control. In Niamey, "Women deploy a multitude of stratagems to manage their fertility within the pre-established social landscape. They may use methods that are socially reproved to space out their pregnancies or to render themselves (generally temporarily) infertile" (3). This is a central theme of the book: women's agency and resistance in the face of societal control over their reproductive lives. In developing this theme, Moussa highlights the persistence of traditional contraceptive methods like *hawari*, even as (bio)medical contraception becomes more available (162). Her work builds upon foundational texts in African women's history (such as Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi [eds.], *Women in African Colonial Histories* [2002]; and Kathleen Sheldon, *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century* [2017]), while offering fresh perspectives on women's agency across precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial contexts. As editors Alice J. Kang and Barbara M. Cooper note in the introduction, the book "combines the insights of political science and anthropology to track the imbrication of techniques of fertility regulation, whether contraceptive or conceptive, in the creation of gendered social hierarchies" (xiv).


At the heart of Moussa's analysis lies her nuanced portrayal of women's reproductive agency. Rather than presenting women as passive victims, she highlights their "microstrategies" and "silent revolts"—discreet acts of resistance that challenge dominant cultural narratives. Perhaps most provocative too is Moussa's framing of abortion as a form of "infertile sexuality"—a concept that

challenges the dominant cultural narrative equating female identity with motherhood. By secretly terminating pregnancies, both unmarried and married women engage in a kind of reproductive dissent, defying societal condemnation to prioritize their own needs and desires over pro-natalist imperatives. In this way, abortion emerges as a radical, even if risky, act of bodily self-determination within a restrictive social landscape.

As the narrative unfolds, Moussa guides readers through a holistic examination of fertility management, spanning domestic, popular therapeutic, and biomedical spheres. Her critique of the biomedical “contraceptive standard” that promotes medicalization and institutional control over female bodies exposes tensions between patients and providers shaped by power imbalances and social hierarchies. This approach illuminates the complexities of fertility regulation in rapidly evolving African societies.

While *Yearning and Refusal* may not introduce groundbreaking theoretical frameworks, its laser-focused ethnography of Niamey offers a depth of insight that compensates for any limitations in geographical scope. Although the localized nature of the study might ostensibly restrict the generalizability of its findings, Moussa’s meticulous documentation of lived experiences in urban Niger provides a rich tapestry of data that resonates far beyond its immediate context. Her deft navigation of sensitive topics and a nuanced exploration of the interplay between traditional and biomedical interventions significantly advance our understanding of reproductive autonomy. This balanced approach not only illuminates the complexities of fertility regulation but also serves as a compelling model for future research in similar sociocultural landscapes.

Ultimately, *Yearning and Refusal* emerges as a pivotal work, deftly unraveling the complex tapestry of gender, power, and reproduction in contemporary Africa, transcending traditional academic boundaries with its multifaceted approach. Moussa’s work serves as an indispensable resource not only for scholars and students across anthropology, history, sociology, gender studies, and public health but also for healthcare providers. By challenging dominant narratives of women’s subordination and illuminating the myriad ways women navigate their reproductive lives amidst formidable societal pressures, Moussa offers a nuanced perspective that is both enlightening and actionable. Her incisive ethnography challenges prevailing narratives of women’s subordination and unveils a landscape of quiet resistance and strategic agency. It offers a nuanced lens through which to view reproductive politics in patriarchal settings.

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