

Water Vendors in Niamey: Considering the Economic and Symbolic Nature of Water

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Abstract: This article considers the impact of commodification, urbanization, and technology on water systems and cultural relations in the urban context of Niamey, Niger. We focus on the lives and work of water vendors (called *ga'ruwa* in Hausa) working in the informal economy. Fieldwork in 2013 and 2014 sought answers to two related questions. First, why are *ga'ruwa* jobs in Niamey dominated by immigrant men? And, second, why do Nigerien men in Niamey avoid this job, even in light of high unemployment? We argue that *ga'ruwa* offer a conduit for understanding key cultural symbols, values, and social relationships that lead to answers to these questions, but that we also must understand symbols, values, and social relationships to understand the *ga'ruwa* themselves.

Introduction

In Niger, water is a matter of life and death, and a key multivalent symbol. In this paper, we offer a holistic examination of water in Niamey—the capital of Niger—considering the economic importance and symbolic meanings of water and their interrelations. In most of Niger, particularly in rural Niger where 75 percent of the population lives, water is regarded as part of the commons, open to all who use their labor to draw it from community wells. Other wells in Niger are privately owned, while pastoral nomadic Fulani and Tuareg recognize wells as owned by particular lineages. Only 39 percent of Nigeriens living in rural areas have access to chemically treated potable water, and water-borne diseases are a leading cause of death in Niger, particularly of infants and young children.¹ In urban Niger, particularly in Niamey, water has been commodified and integrated into the global capitalist economy, which has led to

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other important social transformations. Virtually all residents in Niamey enjoy access to treated, potable, and piped water. Indeed, often they cite this as a key marker of Niamey's modernity.

While a small minority of Niamey residents enjoys running water piped directly inside their homes or courtyards, most residents of Niamey rely on daily deliveries of water made by ambulatory vendors. These vendors—called *ga'ruwa* in Hausa (literally "there is water"), and the most commonly used term in Niamey—purchase water at street-side standpipes where they fill ten to fourteen twenty-liter plastic containers of water and deliver it for a higher price to regular customers using metal pushcarts with bicycle wheels specifically designed for this purpose by local blacksmiths.²

Almost all *ga'ruwa* in Niamey are immigrant Tuareg and Fulani men from Mali—especially the Gao and Timbuktu regions, and to a lesser extent from the far western regions of Niger near the Mali border—who, although they are not officially organized, support each other with union-like solidarity. Our paper seeks answers to two related questions. First, why are *ga'ruwa* jobs in Niamey dominated by immigrant Tuareg and Fulani men from Mali? Second, why do Nigerien men in Niamey, particularly from the traditionally sedentary Hausa, Zarma, and Songhay, avoid this job, despite most Nigerien residents of Niamey being underemployed or unemployed? Water delivery is not a great job and requires physically strenuous work, but it is a steady job that offers an above average income. We argue that to understand why Nigerien men and women reject this job requires the interpretation of water as a key cultural symbol, as well as an understanding of ethnic and gender relations.

Our approach builds on core themes in the literature on water and extends recent influential studies on water delivery systems to offer an innovative, holistic perspective on water in Niamey. The bulk of the literature on water focuses on a few key themes of crucial global significance, particularly public health problems associated with lack of access to clean water, strategies to expand access to potable water, water crises, and water wars.³ This article takes account of these issues, but they are not its central concern. Rather, this article uses water and its commodification as a cultural symbol and mechanism for interpreting social relations in the urban context of Niamey. Focusing on the lives and work of water vendors allows us to develop a holistic understanding of the material, symbolic, and cultural elements of water in Niamey in particular and Niger in general. That is, we explore a dialectical relationship. We argue, on the one hand, that *ga'ruwa* offer a conduit for understanding key cultural symbols, values, and social relationships, and the other hand, that we must understand symbols, values, and social relationships in order to understand the *ga'ruwa*. The *ga'ruwa* are ideally positioned to explore this dialectical relationship because they do not just operate within an established infrastructure. As this paper shows, they are infrastructure.⁴ In his key paper, "People as Infrastructure," Abdoumalig Simone explains that in Africa "state administrations and civil institutions have lacked the political and economic power to assign the diversity of activities taking place within the city (buying, selling, residing, etc.) to bounded spaces of deployment, codes of articulation, or the purview of designated actors."⁵ These conditions influence how people live, negotiate, and collaborate within the urban context.⁶ It is within this context of the absence of state oversight and the inability of residents within African cities to improve their livelihoods that the *ga'ruwa* exist.

To that end, after a brief historical overview of Niamey's urban water regime, there are two main sections of this article. The first is an ethnographic exploration of the *ga'ruwa* in Niamey as a conduit for understanding cultural symbols. The second is an exploration of the symbolic nature of water, particularly as it relates to gender and ethnicity, which is a key to further understanding of water delivery systems. Underlying both sections is the impact of commodification, urbanization, and technology on water systems and cultural relations.

The connections between water and culture have received minor attention by scholars. The most comprehensive consideration of this connection is found in the recent interdisciplinary work *The Social Life of Water*, edited by John R. Wagner.⁷ Here, social scientists explore ways by which the triad of commodification, urbanization, and technology impact access to and the quality of water, as well as the lives of people involved. In addition, we have explored the connections between water and material culture in previously published works.⁸ A few studies consider water vendors in other African contexts, namely in Ghana, Kenya, Sudan, and Tanzania.⁹ These studies provide a foundation for our work because they provide a basis for comparison with our case study in Niamey. Finally, and specific to Niamey, Hungerford and Bontianti et al. show how the factors that guide water policies in Niger (location of the piped water network, land tenure status, age of neighborhood) do not provide an accurate picture of water access, and do not account for the service provided by urban water vendors.¹⁰

Research Methods

This paper draws from informal research conducted over the past few years in both urban and rural Niger, as well as one month of formal ethnographic research in five inner city neighborhoods in Niamey in December 2013 and January 2014. Our primary research methods included (1) structured interviews with *ga'ruwa*, *ga'ruwa* customers, and water officials; (2) shadowing *ga'ruwa* on their daily delivery rounds; and (3) focused observations at public standpipes. More specifically, we began with long interviews with eight *ga'ruwa* while we shadowed them on their daily deliveries over several days. We observed the conditions of their work, and their interactions with each other, standpipe managers, and customers. During this time, we also conducted long interviews with six *ga'ruwa* customers. These interviews inspired more focused interviews with twenty *ga'ruwa* and their customers on the role of Malians as the primary *ga'ruwa* in Niamey, the Islamic prohibitions regarding water, and the solidarity of the *ga'ruwa*. In addition, we completed six interviews with water officials, including three standpipe managers, two Société d'Exploitation des Eau du Niger (SEEN) agents, and one with the head of the tax collection agency in Niamey's City Hall. Finally, we observed many standpipes in five poor neighborhoods in the city, concentrating on their conditions and the social interactions that take place there.

In addition, we spent dozens of hours in 2013-2014 participating in streetside *hira* ("conversation") groups discussing a wide range of topics, including the *ga'ruwa*. Hausa men are the primary participants in these conversations groups, but they also include a minority of Zarma and Songhay men.¹¹ Our fieldwork revealed that conditions and working relationships instituted by the *ga'ruwa* stand in contrast to those reported in other African cities, mostly in East Africa. By focusing on water vendors, this article helps provide a more complete story of urban water access, as well as a contribution to broader connections between water and culture.

A Brief History of Water Access in Niamey

France made Niamey the provisional capital of the Territoire Militaire du Niger in 1905, and then the capital of the Colony of Niger in 1926, in part because of its location on the Niger River, the only year-round surface freshwater source in the region, and its proximity to the nearest French-controlled seaport, Conotou (in Benin).¹² At this time, Niamey was little more than a group of small fishing villages.¹³ The French instituted the first urban water regime in the city in the early 1920s. Municipal water services appeared in the 1930s, in a clearly inequitable and racist manner, purposefully restricting water access to colonial neighborhoods. It was not until after 1940 that the urban water regime expanded services to the rest of the city through a series of public water taps, or standpipes.¹⁴

One factor driving the expansion of Niamey's piped water network was the growth of the city's population. In 1955, Niamey's population was estimated at just over 24,000. By 1975, the city's population had grown to over 198,000.¹⁵ Between 1988 and 2010 Niamey's population tripled from 400,000 to 1.3 million and its geographic footprint expanded five-fold.¹⁶ France continued to influence urban planning and water governance, even after Niger gained its independence in 1960. Thirty years of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which required the government to relinquish control of state-owned enterprises (including water governance), further eroded Nigerien authority over the water regime. Vivendi Water (now Veolia Water) purchased a 51 percent share of the water utility in Niamey in 2001. Veolia Water—a multinational corporation headquartered in France—is the world's largest supplier of water services. According to Bontiani et al., this SAP also:

required that four new institutions be created to govern Niamey's (and other urban centers) water: *la Société de patrimoine des Eaux du Niger* (SPEN), *la Société d'Exploitation des Eaux du Niger* (SEEN), *le Projet sectoriel eau* (PSE), and *l'Authorité de regulation multisectionnelle* (ARM). In this new configuration, the state's role in urban water was not direct provisioning or planning. Rather the new role for the state was in guiding national water discourse, proposing and implementing legislation, and defining the political goals behind water pricing . . . The private sector, SEEN, was assigned the role of direct provisioning and interacting with the population.¹⁷

Today, the state and the private sector compete for profits, distribution, and regulation of urban water policy in Niamey, a city with now over 1.6 million people.¹⁸ Thus, Niameésiens have had to pay for water since formal distribution structures were established. However, the commodification of water is a complex issue in this predominantly Muslim country. The sacredness of water is expressed through Islamic prohibitions of its sale: "the specific *hadith* related to this states, 'Allah's Messenger forbade the sale of excess water.'"¹⁹ In the modern capitalist world of Niamey, however, water has been commodified and is sold by (particular) men. The selling and delivering of water has become acceptable—a basic social service. However, participants in the study consistently indicated that Muslims should never have to pay for water at a standpipe or elsewhere to perform their ablutions before their prayers. Furthermore, over time, drought, climate change, and increasing rates of rural to urban

migration have encouraged the emergence of informal paths to water access, such as mobile water vendors, alongside these formal structures of water distribution.

Water Vendors in Niamey: Exploring the Role of the *Ga'ruwa*

Water delivery is an essential element of daily life in Niamey, especially considering that only a minority of households and compounds has direct access to running water, and thus, the *ga'ruwa* are an important link in the story of water access.

The Emergence of Water Vendors in Niamey

Hungerford estimates that water vendors first emerged on the urban landscape in Niamey in the 1950s, and both their methods of water delivery and importance within the water network have continued to evolve.²⁰ Residents of Niamey that we interviewed confirmed this. According to one Tuareg from Mali who has lived in Niamey since the 1960s:

The *ga'ruwa* history dates back to my knowledge since the Diori era [Hamani Diori served as the first President of the independent Republic of Niger, from 1960 to 1974]. Actually, during that era, pumps were rare in the city of Niamey... At that time, the *ga'ruwa* carried the water on their heads while saying, '*ga garwar ruwa guda*' ['look at me carrying one kerosene can full of water']. It's beyond that, it's gone; this activity experienced a big advancement. Today the *ga'ruwa* have carts and plastic containers.²¹

A social anthropologist in Niamey more specifically describes the material changes of *ga'ruwa* water delivery:

In the past, *ga'ruwa* sold water using oil drums called "*tukku*" in Hausa (white metal containers for product preservation such as petroleum). Two oil drums fastened to a pole, together is called "*talla*" in Hausa. Today the oil drums are disappearing and being replaced by 20 and 25 liter cooking oil containers.²²

The transition from *tukku* to plastic cooking oil containers occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in part due to health concerns stemming from the re-use of containers used to store and transport petroleum.²³ Today some Niameésens express concerns about plastic leeching into the water—both from the transportation containers used by *ga'ruwa* and the large plastic containers for home storage.²⁴

As highlighted earlier, almost all *ga'ruwa* in Niamey are immigrant Tuareg and Fulani men from Mali—especially the Gao and Timbuktu regions, and to a lesser extent from the far western regions of Niger near the Mali border. Tuareg and Fulani water carriers have come to Niamey due a range of motivations and have been there for wide ranging lengths of time. They are typically men who have either lost their herds or are trying to rebuild their diminished herds by earning cash and have been in Niamey for five to fifteen years. A few have been water carriers in Niamey for thirty years or more. Finally, some are refugees from the recent conflicts in Mali and have only been in Niamey for a couple of years.²⁵

Being and Becoming a Ga'ruwa

The length of time needed for Tuareg and Fulani men to establish themselves as independent *ga'ruwa* varies from a few months to a few years depending on individuals' prior connections and resources. They must integrate themselves in networks of *ga'ruwa* who are already established in this occupation, and work in informal apprenticeships. They typically begin by filling in for other *ga'ruwa* who leave for visits to their hometowns. Before they set out on their own, they must have their own pushcarts and water containers. New pushcarts cost 50,000 francs (CFA) each (\$100 USD), and used ones sell for 35,000 each (\$70 USD). The water containers cost 750–1000 CFA each (\$1.50–\$2.00 USD).²⁶ The pushcarts and containers are made by local blacksmiths and sold primarily at the Katako Market, Niamey's main construction materials market. Those who cannot afford to purchase the tools of the trade can rent them in order to get started. Most *ga'ruwa* learn basic Hausa and/or Zarma, the most commonly spoken languages in Niamey, to accelerate the apprenticeship process. Finally, vendors must purchase annual licenses of 4,500 CFA (\$9 USD) from the city to operate. From there, the job requires maintaining and developing clientele, and hard work.

Ga'ruwa in Niamey typically work from sunrise to sunset seven days a week. They operate in almost every neighborhood in Niamey. Only in a few pockets within wealthy neighborhoods are they rare or non-existent. At sunrise (or earlier during the hot season, when water does not always regularly flow through the piped system), *ga'ruwa* bring their carts to the single standpipe from which they work and fill the ten to fourteen twenty-liter containers of water on their wheeled carts. *Ga'ruwa* always use the same standpipe to fill their containers for two primary reasons. First, customers are charged for delivery based on the distance the *ga'ruwa* has to travel from the standpipe to the customer's home. Using the same standpipe to obtain water means that the cost to the consumer is consistent. Second, there is an informal agreement between *ga'ruwa* that each one will use the same standpipe every day so as not to infringe upon the territory or customers of other *ga'ruwa*. *Ga'ruwa* are not assigned to particular standpipes, but become affiliated with certain standpipes through the integration and apprenticeship process mentioned earlier. Using multiple standpipes to fill water containers would be a violation of this unwritten agreement.

Challenges in Water Delivery

Delivering water is physically strenuous. *Ga'ruwa* push their metal carts with full water containers on mostly unpaved, uneven neighborhood streets. Upon reaching a customer, the *ga'ruwa* carries the containers of water, two at a time, into the customer's home or compound and empties the water in larger storage containers (plastic barrels or clay pots) indicated by the customer. The *ga'ruwa* typically must return to the standpipe to refill their containers after delivering water to three to five customers. One *ga'ruwa* described the physical impact of the job, "At nightfall, my entire body hurts especially my chest and hips. There are some places where there is too much sand, stones, and inclines, where we must push [the carts] with a lot of energy."²⁷ According to another *ga'ruwa*, "Today, if you find me another job, for example security, I will give up this work that I've done since the time of Ali Chaibou [1987]. You see that makes me old. At that time, there were no carts with containers, only *le tagala* (two buckets attached to a pole and carried on the shoulders)."²⁸ *Ga'ruwa* also suffer with painful cracked

feet due to standing in pools of water around standpipes. Almost all *ga'ruwa* wear closed-toe, fully plastic shoes of the same brand made in China to combat this problem. As one *ga'ruwa* explained, "It is to protect us against the water. These shoes do not weigh much, they aren't too heavy to wear, they adapt to all places and all circumstances, and they are like sports shoes. If we bend over to push the cart in the sand, they do not break. Their price varies from 1,100 to 1,250 CFA francs."²⁹

If business is good, then the *ga'ruwa* take occasional breaks, usually in a shaded area close to their standpipe. In the hot season, these breaks last longer due to fatigue and if little or no water is flowing through the standpipe. Understanding the water needs of their customers, the *ga'ruwa* try to deliver water around the same time of day every day (morning, mid-day, afternoon). The regular delivery schedule ensures a consistent customer base.

Ga'ruwa face other challenges in their work, particularly due to dangerous situations on the street and stubborn customers. One 35-year old Nigerien *ga'ruwa* from the Kandaji-Tillabery region (near Mali), described these challenges:

If you look in our carts, there is a staff hung on the side, that is for approaching certain situations (dog attacks, or bandits, or someone refusing to pay us). The second problem that we have is the refusal of certain people to pay us at the end of a predetermined consumption period. They tell us to go complain everywhere we want. When it comes to us, we leave them with their conscience, as even Islam spoke of the value of water in the life of an individual. We are not like the SEEN, who, when you do not pay your bill at the end of the month, cut you off. These are problems that we regularly encounter in our work that will push us one day to establish a union to defend our interests.³⁰

Although none of the *ga'ruwa* that we interviewed mentioned the difficulty of doing their jobs during Ramadan, we sense that this is a particularly challenging time for them, especially when Ramadan falls during the hot season. Their customers consume almost as much water daily during Ramadan as they do daily during the rest of the year, because from sunset to sunrise they cook, drink lots of water, and bathe. *Ga'ruwa* must continue their daily water deliveries. They must push heavy carts full of water and lift heavy containers full of water all day, but they cannot drink any of it.

Ga'ruwa straddle the formal and informal economies of Niamey. As mentioned earlier, to work as *ga'ruwa* in Niamey, they must acquire annual licenses from the city at a cost of 4,500 CFA (\$9 USD). This amount represents a 1,000 CFA (\$2 USD) increase between 2013 and 2014, a condition that frustrated many *ga'ruwa* in our study. Other than paying the annual fee, no other official requirements for *ga'ruwa* exist. The *ga'ruwa* do not pay taxes or report income to the city. Thus, after paying the annual fee, they shift to an economic activity (water delivery) that falls into the informal economy, although they still use formal structures—the piped water network—to perform this task.

Ga'ruwa and Public Standpipes

In Niamey, neighborhood men manage standpipes. These men are of various ethnic groups, including Hausa, Zarma, and Songhay, but they are disproportionately Tuareg and Fulani. In many neighborhoods, this job rotates among a few people. Standpipe managers have three

primary responsibilities. First, they collect money from *ga'ruwa* for the water they take from the standpipes to fill their containers. These managers also collect money from individuals who live close enough to the standpipe to transport water themselves. The managers, in turn, pay the city (and by extension, Veolia) for the water use. Second, they must maintain the cleanliness of the pipes and the areas around them, otherwise they face fines imposed by city hall that regularly sends inspectors out to check on the condition of standpipes. Third, standpipe managers mediate and resolve disputes between their customers. Customers are expected to respect rules of decorum. *Ga'ruwa* are the primary customers and they should park their carts by order of arrival and patiently take turns. However, when a customer arrives with a single bucket, the *ga'ruwa* should allow him to fill it if the *ga'ruwa* is at the beginning of his loading. *Ga'ruwa* who have already filled two or more containers expect to complete filling all ten or twelve containers before relinquishing the hose to a person with only one container.

During our fieldwork, we witnessed several disputes precipitated by *ga'ruwa*'s reluctance to surrender water hoses to non-*ga'ruwa*. In one typical scenario, a customer with a single bucket politely attempted to jump to the front of the queue. An angry *ga'ruwa* shouted, "Didn't you see me here! You must hold on, I am not obligated to give you the hose, be respectful of people." The local resident aggressively answered, "What is this? Help me! Why do I have to wait for you to fill all of your containers when I only have one container?" As the situation appeared to be escalating to a potential fist fight, the manager intervened to restore peace, "Hey you two, that is not how it is done. You must respect people, things can be negotiated, do not use force. *Ga'ruwa*, forgive him, have patience." The *ga'ruwa* accepted this mediation and handed over the hose.

Ga'ruwa pay the standpipe managers 15 CFA (\$.03 USD) per twenty-liter container of water filled, and the *ga'ruwa* collect 25-50 CFA (\$.05-.10 USD) for each twenty-liter container of water delivered, depending on the distance between the customer and the standpipe. *Ga'ruwa* also make spontaneous sales of water on the street, for example, to commercial truck drivers about to embark on long trips. Thus, a *ga'ruwa* who pushes a cart that carries ten containers earns a profit of 100-350 CFA (\$.20-.70 USD) per cartload, after paying the standpipe manager for the water. Drawing from our observations while shadowing *ga'ruwa* on their daily rounds, refilling containers takes about ten minutes when water is regularly running to public standpipes, delivery trips last about forty-five minutes each, and *ga'ruwa* make about twelve delivery trips daily. Hence, *ga'ruwa* earn 1,200-4,200 CFA (\$2.40-\$8.40 USD) daily. Although this income is small, it is above average and fairly consistent, as most households require daily water delivery. According to one *ga'ruwa*, "It has been three years that I have been working as a *ga'ruwa* in Niamey. Thank God. I have found fulfillment here, in fact I got married here. I am buying some fertilizer to send to the village to put in my garden. I sometimes send money to my parents who are in the village. Anyway, I make a living here."³¹

Ga'ruwa and Water Bureaucracies

Ga'ruwa encounter many circumstances that can lead to loss of income. For example, they earn no income on days they do not work for whatever reason and on days in the hot season when water may slow to a trickle or cease flowing altogether to public standpipes, especially those most distant from water towers. In addition, in recent years SEEN has offered promotional

discounted rates to install pipes in homes and on the first month's water bill, leading many to switch to piped water. For example, Issoufou, a former *ga'ruwa* customer explained, "About a month ago we stopped using the services of *ga'ruwa*. In fact the homeowner recently installed a pump." Several of the *ga'ruwa* that we interviewed complained about a drastic drop in customers. As one *ga'ruwa* put it, "Now we don't have many customers, many people have access to their own pumps at home." However, we think that this downturn in business is localized. We do not think that SEEN can switch enough households to piped water to offset Niamey's continuing growth. Niamey is projected to remain one of the world's fastest growing cities with annual growth rates projected at 5 percent for the next fifteen years.³² Much of Niamey's population growth is occurring in peri-urban areas that are not yet connected to the piped network. These conditions will continue to provide ample opportunities for *ga'ruwa* to find work. Furthermore, Niamey's ever-growing low-income populations cannot do without the services of the *ga'ruwa*.

Ga'ruwa and Gendered Spaces

The job of delivering water also places the *ga'ruwa* in a grey area in terms of gender relations. In Niamey (and in Niger in general) interactions between men and women are governed by cultural and religious assumptions. During the day, male family members are typically absent from households and compounds in Niamey, usually because they are working, trying to find work, visiting friends and family, or in school. In this situation, it is highly unusual for male non-family members to be allowed into households or compounds. However, the *ga'ruwa* are an exception. Not only do *ga'ruwa* enter compounds, they carry water into typically female spaces, such as the cooking or washing areas, to empty the water containers into larger storage containers in customers' homes. Assumptions about water perhaps explain this acceptance. Among sedentary agriculturalists in rural Niger, obtaining water and transporting it to households is a job that is considered women's work. Although men in Niamey deliver water, it is perhaps the activity, rather than their gender, which makes their presence in the home acceptable, even when male family members are absent. After all, water is the essential element in cooking, bathing, washing, and for drinking.

Ga'ruwa in the Cultural Landscape

Water delivery is so essential in Niamey, and such an important element of daily life, that cultural landscapes have been created by the process of water delivery and can be found in almost all neighborhoods in Niamey. For example, it is often clusters of *ga'ruwa* carts with yellow containers that identify locations of public standpipes (especially for outsiders like us), rather than the standpipes themselves that tend to visibly blend into the surrounding landscape, particularly those located along busy streets. The *ga'ruwa* are part of the economic landscape in Niamey. They travel between busy intersections where public standpipes are often located, and small, quiet, neighborhood streets. The metal carts and yellow containers common to all *ga'ruwa* specifically identify them to passersby as water deliverers. However, *ga'ruwa* try to personalize this common image by adding decorations to their metal carts, such as flags of their country or region of origin, or colored ribbons. Not only does this personalization mark contrasts between *ga'ruwa* and the public image with which they are

associated, it also serves a practical purpose, as it distinguishes one metal cart from another, an essential characteristic around busy public standpipes.

Solidarity among *Ga'ruwa*

While operating as individuals in the urban economic activity of water delivery, *ga'ruwa* also operate under a union-like form of solidarity, a condition that sets them apart from water vendors in East Africa where vendors compete with each other for customers and water sources.³³ Understanding the solidarity among and between Tuareg and Fulani *ga'ruwa* requires some historical perspective on their relations. In the pastoral zones of Niger and Mali, Tuareg and Fulani lineages have their own inherited wells. They use each other's wells only with permission, which is rare, because it involves moving large numbers of animals through potential pasturage. However, they have learned to cooperate and share state-sponsored boreholes, some of which have been in place since the early colonial period a century ago.³⁴ Tuareg and Fulani do share some cultural affinity, particularly through their identities as herders and nomads. Today several prominent musical performance groups such as Etran Finatawa in Niger include both Tuareg and Fulani together.

The union-like solidarity among and between Tuareg and Fulani *ga'ruwa* in Niamey is crucial to their success. They often work together or at least agree not to infringe on each other's pre-established territories and clientele. They fill in for fellow *ga'ruwa* when they cannot work due to illness or other reasons. They share information, allowing them, for example, to collectively boycott households that consistently ask for credit but do not make good on it. The city grants all *ga'ruwa* license requests, as the fee provides income for the city, so theoretically there is no limit to the number of *ga'ruwa* that operate annually in Niamey. Thus, the informal solidarity between *ga'ruwa* helps to maintain order and ensure customers' needs are met. Water delivery is not a free-for-all in Niamey.

The solidarity between *ga'ruwa* is a reality recognized by everyone—*ga'ruwa* and their customers. For example, a *ga'ruwa* at a tap stand explained:

That is true, we do stick together, if you have a problem with one of our comrades, we will not serve you, because we tell ourselves that we can have the same problems with you as well. This solidarity is explained by the fact that we do the same work. If I sell water to one of my comrade's clients while he is away, without his authorization, it is hypocrisy, betrayal. When a *ga'ruwa* sells water to another's client right in front of him and the latter *ga'ruwa* doesn't react immediately, be sure that they will settle it once they go back to their base to rest.³⁵

Similarly, Assoumane, a tea vendor in who relies on *ga'ruwa* for his water supply, observed:

They have solidarity. If you have your *ga'ruwa* who brings you water every day, and if there is a day where he isn't there and you ask another to bring you water, he will never do it, he will tell you to wait until your *ga'ruwa* comes back. No matter how much you shout, he will not look at you, even if he has extra water in the containers, he prefers to return to the tap stand to refill his cart. Personally, my *ga'ruwa* brings me water in the morning, but sometimes I need water at other times; at those times, I must negotiate with their elder in order for them to serve

me in the evening if I need it. He does this service for me because he has been with us for a long time, it's at my house that he eats breakfast; he is from our ethnic group. The last time that my *ga'ruwa* wanted to return to the country, he came to introduce me to his replacement.³⁶

According to Abdoul Malik, another *ga'ruwa* customer nearby:

Yes, that is a reality. In fact, one day when Mamou, the owner of the tap stand that you see in front of us, had a problem with a *ga'ruwa*, all of his *ga'ruwa* clients boycotted his tap stand to join the neighboring tap stand. They truly do stick together. This would be explained by the fact that in general, they come from the same family or the same locality.³⁷

Moussa Mahamadou, another customer, explained:

They do stick together. One must avoid piling up outstanding debts with a *ga'ruwa*, as soon as he informs his friends, they as well will avoid you. I remember well the time when one was subscribed to a *ga'ruwa*: if he traveled, he would be replaced by someone. Before leaving, he would consult his clients and offer them the position. It's absolutely normal that they stick together since they practice the same profession. It's like trade unions for workers.³⁸

Despite the comradery in the context of work, however, Tuareg and Fulani *ga'ruwa* tend to socialize in ethnically segregated groups after hours. Most *ga'ruwa* are either single or do not have their wives with them in Niamey. As a result, they cook and eat together, and often live together. As Abdoul Malik, a customer, observed:

The concrete example is that of the local group of *ga'ruwa* that are composed of ten or so elderly people and young people. They contribute enough between them to pay for the essentials. This does not prevent those who have some money to pay for meat or other things to accentuate the courses. The young ones prepare the dishes in turns; as for the old ones, they are exempted from cooking. Between them, they tease each other a lot, provoke each other, and fight; each time that I observe them, they make me understand that it is between them, that they are parents, and notably, cousins.³⁹

In other words, the roles assigned in non-work situations are a result of ethnic and familial relations, rather than their role as *ga'ruwa*. Yet, it is shared experience of delivering water in particular cultural contexts that results in a comradery that crosses ethnic lines.

Water as a Key Cultural Symbol

On the exterior wall of a middle school in Niamey Bas, a downtown neighborhood, students have painted an eight-meter high mural depicting people enjoying clean drinking water and watering their garden. The image is accompanied by a caption, "*l'Eau est vie*" ("Water is life"). This is more than a simple truism. Water is of vital importance in the survival, cosmologies, religions, and gender relations among Nigerien peoples. Across Niger, water is a symbol of hospitality. It is always the first thing that hosts offer to guests. We argue that in order to understand the culture of *ga'ruwa* and their role in the urban water regime of Niamey, we need to understand the symbolic value of water and the social relationships that revolve around it,

particularly gender relations. Furthermore, exploring the relationships between *ga'ruwa*, water, and ideas about gender helps us answer our original questions about why these water vendors are male immigrants.

In Niger, the procurement and delivery of water is a gendered activity that is gendered in particular ways among different ethnic groups. Among the sedentary agriculturalist Hausa, Zarma, and Songhay who live in rural areas, village women gather and deliver water as mothers and wives—one or two twenty-liter containers at a time, either carried atop their heads, or on either ends of poles balanced over their shoulders. This is regarded as “women’s work” and women are not paid for this service. Furthermore, women are expected to serve water to men, never the reverse. Although this is difficult and time-consuming labor, they have carved out one of few public women’s spaces at village wells. Pausing at wells offers one of the few moments in women’s busy days to gather solely in the company of women to share news, tell stories, and laugh.

In contrast, among urban Hausa, Zarma, and Songhay in Niamey, only men gather and deliver water, and they do so for pay (women also serve water to men in the city). Urban men in Niamey claim that it is a good thing that urban women are “relieved of this difficult chore,” but we note that this gain comes with the loss of an important women’s space and potential, paying jobs.⁴⁰ Furthermore, while women do not gather and deliver water, they are responsible for cooking, washing, cleaning, and bathing children, all of which involve water. Women are also responsible for storing water for short-term use, either in traditional Nigerien-made clay pots or in cheap plastic containers imported from China. Thus, in the urban context of Niamey, women are responsible for using water (and, as customers, for securing its presence in the household), but they are removed from the delivery process.⁴¹

Among the traditionally nomadic Fulani and Tuareg, the procurement and delivery of water is also gendered, but in different and less dichotomous ways than among sedentary peoples. Among the Fulani, men and women are far less segregated than their sedentary neighbors. Men typically draw water for livestock, especially cattle, whereas women gather water for household use. However, Fulani women help in getting water for animals where there are not enough men to do it. They may specialize in distributing it to goats, sheep, and calves, depending on the situation. Women also herd, especially young girls, if there are no males to do so.⁴²

Since independence, the nomadic pastoral way of life among the Fulani has become increasing precarious as many have lost their herds and have had no choice but to take up farming or urban labor. As noted by Kristín Loftsdóttir in her long-term study of WoDaaBe (a Fulani sub-group in Niger), important scholars of the Fulani such as Dupire have, for more than fifty years, documented “an element of shame associated with being engaged in occupations other than herding one’s own animals.”⁴³ The passage of time has brought the realization that diversified economies drawing on rural and urban, nomadic and sedentary ways of making a living are necessary, and hence the shame of doing work outside of the pastoral economy has diminished. Loftsdóttir “did not find WoDaaBe migrant workers being generally ashamed of their work in the city. Some individuals I interacted with were on the contrary relatively proud of their work in the city, emphasizing their importance for providing a security net for those in the bush.”⁴⁴ Loftsdóttir goes on to explain that, “Shame seems thus today to be more connected

to failure of earning income from one's activities in the city rather than working as a migrant laborer [*per se*]. Some occupations, such as tea selling, rope making, and water carrying are [generally] associated with failure, and thus shameful."⁴⁵ In contrast, making and selling handicrafts and art is generally more lucrative than other typical jobs Fulani get in the city, and it is not considered shameful. The Fulani *ga'ruwa* that we interviewed in Niamey did not express shame or embarrassment in doing this work, though several told us that they would much prefer to be herding cattle in the bush. There are several possible explanations for this. For example, they may have felt too proud to share this feeling with strangers, or we may simply encountered men who were earning enough money to send some home regularly.

Among the Tuareg, the situation is even more complicated, in part because they are largely matrilineal, as there are regional, rural-urban, nomadic-sedentary, and class-related differences.⁴⁶ In rural Air in Niger, in semi-nomadic and sedentary villages, both sexes draw water from wells; usually, men nowadays get it from wells and a few motor pumps to irrigate their oasis gardens, and young boys tend to draw it from wells to water livestock herds. Women draw water from wells for household use. If possible, adults prefer to have their adolescent children do these arduous tasks, and if they can afford it, some families hire men to draw it. In rural northern Mali in the Adragh and Kidal region, in semi-nomadic villages most Tuareg women of non-servile descent, who avoid most physical labor, disdain this task, and hire Bella men of servile descent to do this, and now pay them for this service. In Saharan multi-ethnic towns such as Agadez and Kidal, the situation is again different. Tuareg families there tend to hire others to do this work if they can afford it. In Agadez, Niger, almost all *ga'ruwa* are Hausa men. Many are refugees or labor migrants from western Niger villages that have been suffered from droughts, locust invasions, and unemployment. In Kidal, Mali, Tuareg families, as in Agadez tend to hire others to fetch water for their households there. As in Agadez, most Tuareg in Kidal try to avoid this task and many hire other non-Tuareg Malians to do it, as well as other domestic tasks, often Dogon men to fetch water and Dogon women to help cook. In sum, there are class and ethnic differences that complicate the gender distinctions, but in urban settings in Tuareg regions, non-Tuareg men and a few Buzu or Bella tend to draw water for households who can afford to hire them.

Conclusions

Having established the dialectical symbolic nature of the *ga'ruwa* and water, we now return to our key original question and its corollary: Why are *ga'ruwa* jobs in Niamey dominated by immigrant Tuareg and Fulani men from Mali? Why do Nigerien men in Niamey, particularly from the traditionally sedentary Hausa, Zarma, and Songhay, avoid this job? The answers are intertwined.

Nigerien men avoid this work in Niamey due to dignity preservation and shame avoidance. Nigerien men (of settled agricultural groups) consider water delivery to be inferior "women's work" and that women should serve men water. Furthermore, Nigerien men feel embarrassed to perform menial, physical labor in public (under the gaze of family, friends, co-ethnics). Finally, some are aware of Islamic prohibitions on selling water and perhaps avoid it for this reason. Reflecting views we heard repeatedly, a Hausa standpipe caretaker in the Koumbia neighborhood observed:

The young Nigeriens, in particular the city dwellers, do not want to do the work of a *ga'ruwa* because they are big-headed, they do not want to suffer as well; they are ashamed. But looking to make money by your own means is better than stealing or begging. If you see some Nigeriens doing the work of a *ga'ruwa* in Niamey, assure yourself that they come from the countryside.⁴⁷

Several of the participants in our study indicated Nigerien men of traditionally sedentary farming groups are willing to do this job abroad, for example as labor migrants in Nigeria and Ghana. Conversely, we learned that Tuareg and Fulani decline *ga'ruwa* work in traditional Tuareg and Fulani settlements.

Tuareg and Fulani of Mali accept this job because they have very few other options in Niamey (in Niamey, they also dominate the night watchmen ranks). Fulani and Tuareg water carriers are recognized as refugees from a bad situation that everybody knows about, and thus have a kind of "identity amnesty."⁴⁸ That is, the general community of Niamey does not judge Tuareg and Fulani *ga'ruwa* as doing something inappropriate because it is understood that they do this work as a result of hardship. They are strangers in a way that the Hausa and Zarma are not, in Niamey and other towns.⁴⁹ They, like Hausa or Zarma migrants in Ghana and elsewhere in West Africa, are far from home. People also know that these are nomads are generally very proud and would not do these things if it were not absolutely necessary.⁵⁰

Recent developments in the nature of water access and delivery in Niamey are ironic in two ways. First, a century ago, nomadic Tuareg and Fulani dominated sedentary Hausa, Zarma, and Songhay. Now they have to do what the latter look down upon as inferior "women's work." While living a sedentary lifestyle that they consider inferior to nomadism, Tuareg and Fulani men are key players in the most critical form of mobile water access in the city. Second, many Tuareg and Fulani have lost herds due to lack of water (and other factors, including state policy) but now must work with water.

Thus, we can clearly see the importance of the interplay of capitalism, urbanization, and technology emphasized by Wagner in Niamey's water regime.⁵¹ The *ga'ruwa* play an essential role in urban water access, operating under a global neoliberal capitalist system using contemporary technology. At the same time, the process of accessing water in Niamey is steeped in cultural traditions and symbolic value that vary by gender, class, and ethnic group. The commodification of water in Niamey is leading to expanding inequality, as access to water differs by socio-economic class and consumption styles have become markers of status. At the same time, the commodification of water has created jobs—*ga'ruwa*, standpipe managers, water executives—and a specific material culture (metal pushcarts, plastic water containers). In contrast, capitalism as it operates in Niamey excludes women from jobs in water management and delivery. Furthermore, plastic water containers made in China are gradually replacing the clay pots made by Zarma women in the nearby village of Boubon for household storage of water.

Household water access in Niamey is the end point in the neo-liberal supply chain of Niamey's water economy. A minority of Niameés articulated objections to Niamey's water regime, particularly on two grounds. First, some argue that the current system is a form of predatory global capitalism that has commodified the commons, extracting profits from an over-exploited country, and denying clean water access to the destitute and people residing in

Niamey's peripheral neighborhoods, many of which lack public standpipes. Second, others, particularly Muslim scholars, argue that the Qur'an forbids the sale of water. In contrast, a majority of Niameés approved of Niamey's water regime, and appreciate the work performed by the *ga'ruwa*. Most are very pleased to have affordable access to treated water. Issoufou, a trader in the Koumbia neighborhood, explained, "They [*ga'ruwa*] really help us because they spare our women from the chore of getting water."⁵² When we specifically asked people about their opinions regarding Islamic prohibitions on selling water, most claimed that this was news to them. For example, one man argued, "For me, it is the first time that I have heard this. It is business. If it is *haram* ["illicit" or "sinful"] then people would not be selling water in Mecca."⁵³ Most men regard the sale and delivery of water as a key social service. Thus, the commodification of water within a global, capitalist system during a time of drought and desertification in a Muslim city has created new symbolic meanings for those involved in its consumption and delivery.

Notes

- 1 USAID 2010: 3,1.
- 2 *Ga'ruwa* is a complicated word. It literally means "there is water," although it does not appear in Hausa dictionaries. *Ruwa* can mean water, but it can also mean juice, semen, usury, and business among other meanings that are context-dependent.
- 3 Thébaud 2001; Giordano et al 2002; Page 2005 ; Annin 2006; Salzman 2012; Halvorson et al. 2011.
- 4 Simone 2004.
- 5 Ibid., p. 409.
- 6 Ibid., p. 410.
- 7 Wagner 2013.
- 8 Keough and Youngstedt 2014.
- 9 In Ghana (Osumanu 2008; Osumanu and Abdul-Rahim 2008), in Kenya (Whittington et al. 1989), in Sudan (Cairncross and Kinnear 1991), and in Tanzania (Kjellen 2000, 2006; Bayliss and Tukai 2011; Smiley 2013).
- 10 Hungerford 2012; Bontiani et al. 2014.
- 11 In twenty-eight years of participant observation in *hira* groups in Niamey, Scott Youngstedt has never met a Hausa, Zarma, or Songhay *ga'ruwa* in Niamey.
- 12 Niamey was first established as the provisional capital in 1905, but lost that position in 1911 to Zinder, further east. In 1926, the French re-established Niamey as the provisional capital for the reasons stated (Youngstedt 2013).
- 13 Youngstedt 2013.
- 14 Hungerford 2012.
- 15 United Nations 2012.
- 16 Youngstedt 2013, p. 42
- 17 Bontiani et al. 2014, p.285.
- 18 United Nations 2012.

- 19 Caponera 2001.
- 20 Hungerford 2012.
- 21 Personal communication, Niamey, 2014.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Hungerford 2012. These large, plastic storage containers, imported from China, are replacing traditional clay posts made by Zarma women of the village of Boubon, which is situated about 25 kilometers outside of the city.
- 25 Personal communication, Niamey, 2014.
- 26 In 2014, \$1 USD was approximately 500 CFA.
- 27 Personal communication, Niamey, 2014.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Demographia 2015.
- 33 Whittington et al 1989; Cairncross and Kinnear 1991; Kjellén 2000 and 2006; Smiley 2013.
- 34 Wilson-Fall in press.
- 35 Personal communication, Niamey, 2014.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 For another discussion on water and gender relations, see our forthcoming publication on the sachet water economy in Niamey, also referred to as "pure water."
- 42 Personal communication (e-mail) with Wendy Wilson-Fall 2014. Wilson-Fall is a leading scholar of the Fulani of Niger.
- 43 Dupire 1962, p. 126-27, cited in Loftsdóttir 2008, p. 154.
- 44 Loftsdóttir 2008, p. 154.
- 45 Ibid., p. 155.
- 46 Rasmussen 2009.
- 47 Personal communication, Niamey, 2014.
- 48 Personal communication (e-mail) with Wendy Wilson-Fall 2014.
- 49 Shack and Skinner 1979.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Wagner 2013.
- 52 Personal communication, Niamey, 2014.
- 53 Ibid.

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