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Never forgetting? Gender and racial-ethnic identity during fieldwork

I am sitting in front of my bed, my eyes focused on the fire. The darkness around me is almost complete, the only sounds being the stirring of the surrounding bush, which disappear rapidly into the endless space. There is no wind, just soft whispers of grass and branches. The rest of the household has disappeared into the night, getting ready for sleep, as I should. Akali, my assistant and friend, the son in this household, is still sitting there, encapsulated in his own thoughts, probably waiting for me to go to sleep.

I have been less than a month in the bush, starting to know its people and daily rhythm. My environment is still new and confusing. I am not able to grasp it, make it sit still, classify it, understand it. Everyday I feel that there are new faces, new environments; the earth is moving under my feet and I just float and move with it, not sure where it is taking me. It is not an unpleasant feeling, just different from what I had expected. What is most difficult is my desire to be myself, to have people look at me and know me as a person. It is not that I resist my new identity as Mariyama, the name which people have started calling me. In fact I like it. Mariyama is also being someone, an individual. It is my other new name that concerns me: *Anasara*, white person. Sometimes people don't bother to call me by my individual name, just say *anasara*. Is that I? My desire is to be seen as something beyond that. These are my thoughts in the darkness, and it is easy to recall them because they have slipped into my mind many times since then. I look up and observe my friend Akali, then interrupt the silence between us, asking: 'Do you think you can ever forget that I am white?' He looks up, stares at me as if wondering if this is a sincere question, and then starts to laugh. His laughter is genuine, almost cheerful. I am hurt, I don't understand: 'Why are you laughing, what is so amusing?' His mild laugher changes into a smile, and he says gently: 'How can I ever forget that you are white?'

I later understand the meaning of this interaction from a more painful and reflective point of view. Being white is the privilege of being able to forget one's 'whiteness' and to forget as well the 'blackness' of others. I write in my diary while in the field: 'You can make friends with people who are so much poorer than you. You will forget the difference of power but they cannot, because the former is a luxury which you can afford but they not' (notebook, 18 January 1998). Later in my fieldwork, this landscape of power is, however, confusingly different. While staying with a family in the bush, I hear about a large dance performance not very far away. I want to go and see it, but when I tell that to the oldest brother of the household, who has assisted me

greatly, he says, 'no'. He explains that he will not take me there because he does not consider it safe for me. Being without transportation and not even knowing clearly where this performance will be held, I depend on him and his family to take me either back to the nearest market, almost two days away, or to places I want to go. A part of the reason why I am staying with this particular family is that this man has agreed to take me to the places I need to go to. Now he explains to me that he will not take me to the dance because he considers it unsafe, stressing that he and his family are responsible for my well being. He continues by stating that they have responsibilities to my family because they have embraced me, a young woman, into theirs. His speech indicates that it is my gender that is the prime factor in his refusal to take me to this place. Frustrated, I explain that my primary goal during my stay is to do research. That is what I came here to do after all. I explain I am primarily an anthropologists but it is of no use. The dance finishes without me seeing it.

Some scholars have credited post-modern perspectives for bringing more critical perspectives to the analysis of processes of ethnographic fieldwork (Downey and Rogers 1995: 269; see also Clifford 1988: 23; Marcus and Fischer 1986: 8), while others point out that feminist anthropology emphasised, prior to the influence of post-modernism, the critical examination of anthropologists' power and privileged positions (Mascia-Lee, Sharpe and Cohen 1989). This so called 'crisis of representation' led to the critical analysis of the production of the 'other' in anthropological texts (Fabian 1984), as well as introspection about the various factors affecting fieldwork processes; from analysing the difference gender makes in respect of ethnographic studies (Bell 1993) to the more navel-gazing of ethnographers' sexual desires in the field (for example, Kulick 1995; Winkelman 1999; Salamone 1999).

Even though I consider the analysis of the creation of the 'other' in popular and anthropological thought being useful, to a certain extent, in addressing the relationship of representation and power, I find it inadequate in reflecting the complex processes taking place during an ethnographic fieldwork. Fieldwork is not acted on passive subjects, but involves complex relationships, which have to do with various kinds of power relationships and interactions. Not only are these relationships important in terms of affecting the quality and kind of data collected, but they have to do with various ethical factors, thus being important in understanding and explaining anthropological epistemological roots, and their role and connection to historical relations of power and domination.

My discussion emphasises the importance of looking at intersections and the dialectical nature of the ethnographer's multiple identities, which unmasks the dualistic opposition of self and other as limited in addressing fieldwork experiences. As argued by Harry Englund and Leach, 'fieldwork as a *lived experience* is indispensable for the production of anthropological knowledge' (Englund and Leach 2000: 229; emphasis mine), thus underlining the importance of the actual experience of the fieldworker in articulating information and understandings. The discourse of self and other in the anthropological literature has often polarised the former as a western powerful white researcher, the later as a native black powerless subject, thus to some extent reproducing binary oppositions of an active agent and a passive subject. Looking at the different dimensions of the ethnographers' self in a fieldwork situation suggests that such binary opposition can, in certain contexts, be limited and self-ratifying. The discussion centres on questions regarding what distinctions of self and other means in a fieldwork context where ethnographers experience highly personal and interpersonal

relationships with their research subjects? How appropriate is such a division in the context of the complex interactions that take place during fieldwork?

I approach this issue by critically examining how two dimensions of identity, 'race' (i.e. social constructions of skin pigmentation)[1] and gender, interacted during my ethnographic fieldwork[2] in Niger among WoDaaBe,[3] connecting furthermore my analysis to discourses on ethnicity. Recent insights, especially from feminist anthropology, have emphasised identity formation as fluid and contextual, pointing attention to the multiple identities of individuals, being classified socially according to various variables such as gender, age, sexual orientation and skin pigmentation (Moore 1994; Alonso 1994; Rosander 1997). During ethnographic fieldwork, these different dimensions of the anthropologist's identity become salient, just as in other social situations. The discussion pays special attention to gendered and racialised ethnic identity as points where production of self and 'other' become blurred and problematic, thus aiming at pointing attention to the complicated dialectical nature of the anthropologists multiple identities.

On whiteness and gender in the field

In his insightful volume, *Anthropology and the colonial encounter*, Talal Asad pointed out that anthropology both in the past and the present has taken place within the shelter of unequal power relationships between the anthropologists and their subjects (Asad 1973). Similar attention to the relationships of power has been drawn by Archie Mafeje in his criticism on the anthropologist's position of power during the colonial period:

> Everywhere they went, the anthropologists were Bwana Mukubwa or Mama by virtue of their skin colour in a colonial setting. They commanded the attention and the services of the natives at will. The fact that some of them were more gentle than others […] is irrelevant. What remains are relations of superordination and subordination or social and political exploitation. (Mafeje 1997: 4)

Asad was, importantly, not claiming that anthropology should simply be seen as the 'handmaiden' of colonialism, but more aiming at underlining the relationships of power between anthropologists and the subjects of their studies in the third world (Asad 1973), thus drawing attention to these relationships as historically constituted.[4] Similar concerns were, as previously mentioned, echoed in relation to the post-

1 I use the term 'race' in this discussion solely to refer to social classifications, but racialism – the belief in races as biological categories – can be seen as one of the most persistent myths of our times (Keita and Kittles 1997). The American Anthropological Association issued a statement on race in 1998 to underline that 'racial myths bear no relationship to the reality of human capabilities or behavior' (AAA Statement on Race 1998: 3). I thus use the term 'race' to refer to social classification of human diversity; in a similar way I do not see the categories 'black' and 'white' as referring to the actual colour of people but to socially constructed categories.

2 My fieldwork was conducted in Niger during the period of August 1996–June 1998, with the generous support of the Nordic Africa Institute and a scholarship from the Rotary International.

3 The capitalized B and D refer to the glottalised consonants in the Fulfulde language (see Pelletier and Skinner 1981:3), referred to as 'injective' consonants by Riesman (Riesman 1977: xxi). The glottal stop is indicated by apostrophe.

4 Mafeje seems, however, to make such claims (Mafeje 1997; Mafeje 1998).

modern movements in anthropology, especially in relation to writing and representations of anthropological subjects, as well as in feminist scholarship. While these movements importantly address the representations and ethnography in anthropological texts in general, these issues being probably acute in fieldwork situations everywhere, my example here is ethnographic research in a marginal country among marginal people, where such issues become perhaps even more problematic. What I want to emphasise is that aside from economical differences created during colonial times, the racial ideologies of superiority and privilege can be seen as a part of the colonial heritage of the present, which, to borrow Etienne Balibar's phrase, 'represents one of the most insistent forms of the historical memory of modern societies' (Balibar 1991: 44–5).[5] In the western world view, whiteness has been constructed as a neutral, invisible social category, giving the privileged position of being able to forget one's skin colour (Frankenberg 1993; Hartigan 1997). Whiteness can thus be said to constitute an unmarked category, just as feminists have pointed out that the category 'male' has historically been located in relation to the sign 'woman'.

Feminist anthropologists have, furthermore, showed that texts are gendered, meaning that studies of other societies and the practice of anthropology involves dimensions of gender (Bell 1993: 4; Callaway 1992: 30), marking both the researchers and their subjects as gendered subjects. Studies discussing the limitations and prospects tied to one's sex in the field suggest that the gendered body and self affects the processes and products of anthropology. Anthropologists have, for example, in this context discussed the anthropologist's gender in relation to the pressure of confirming to local gender ascriptions (see the review in Bell 1993; Barrett 1996: 197-9).

I find recent feminist theories and theories addressing the construction of ethnic identity especially important in relation to understanding gender and racial identity in the field, but these theoretical approaches have increasingly placed an emphasis on identities as contextual, fluid and relational. As Moore argues in relation to gender, 'the divisions between different groups of women … make it impossible to assert a communality based on shared membership in an universal category "woman"' (Moore 1994: 9), thus emphasising the sign 'woman' as characterised by diversity rather than singularity. Similarly, studies on ethnicity have generally seen ethnic identities as relational, fluid and historically constituted, especially since Fredrik Barth's important essay on ethnic boundaries maintenance as constituting important aspect of ethnicity (Barth 1969). As argued by Clifford, ethnic identities are 'an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished' (1988: 9). It makes sense, as seen from these theoretical insights, to emphasise that the fieldworker's identity is not coherent and simple but composed of different aspects in different contexts. It cannot be assumed beforehand how the ethnographers are perceived by their host-communities: as argued by Englund and Leach, 'the ethnographer can never assume prior knowledge of the contexts of people's concerns' (Englund and Leach 2000: 236), nor can relationships of ethnographers and host-communities be generalised too extensively. They must be analysed in an historical context of social and cultural relationships. The expectations of individuals in the same host community can also differ greatly, translating into different expectations regarding the ethnographers and

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5 This is not only a question of memory, but of a certain order of the world where the generations of the present are either reaping the benefits or suffering inequalities due to the 'making' of the world during the colonial period.

relationships with them. As anthropologists have discussed, local informants and assistants can have high expectations of their relationship with the anthropologist, both in terms of material gain and increased power within their community, meaning that these relations become coloured by the discrepancies of money and power.[6]

WoDaaBe in Niger

My ethnographic research, conducted in Niger during the period August 1996 until June 1998, focused on WoDaaBe Fulani, a small minority within a multi-ethnic state. Niger, classified in the World Bank human development index as one of the poorest countries in the world, stands in an ambiguous relationship to its former colonial power and with other western countries. This is, for example, expressed in its dependence on aid, largely provided from this part of the world. It is estimated that close to 95 per cent of Niger's investment budget is provided by aid donors (Matt 1994: 2), making Niger's economy absolutely dependent on foreign aid. That figure is even higher, 96.5 per cent, regarding agriculture, livestock and natural resource management's dependency on foreign aid (World Bank 1991: 18). Aid is, however, not only visible in Niger's economy but also in the cultural and social landscape of Niamey. Signs, standing on cross-roads and street corners, identify names and directions to institutions, in addition to listing various projects and their intended accomplishments. The supermarket *Score* can be seen as a space where these inequalities and differences of power become concentrated in a highly visual manner, as it is used predominantly by western people and affluent Africans, the less affluent gathering outside the large building and attempting to sell some of their few products to those going in and out. Furthermore, some of Niamey's bars are visited almost exclusively by developmental institutions's staff, the average Nigerien kept out with high prices of food and drinks.[7] The number of projects taking place in Niger thanks to various development institutions is so high that it has proved difficult to evaluate the projects' total number at each time. A report from 1994 shows that ongoing projects conducted in Niger, only including those concerned with natural resources, numbered 126 during that year (SDSAP 1994).[8] These impersonal numbers and personal interactions indicates the importance of international agencies as a part of Niger's society and economics, with various effects on people's lives and expectations.

My research involved families in the pastoral area of Niger and WoDaaBe migrant workers in the city, analysing ethnic identity from an historical and political perspective, especially changes resulting from the Sahel droughts in the 1970s and 1980s when many WoDaaBe lost a large part of their livestock (Loftsdóttir 2000; Loftsdóttir 2001). WoDaaBe migrant workers subsist on various activities: men sell tea on the streets, carry water to people's houses, work as night guards at the houses of more affluent citizens, and make and sell jewellery; women generally braid the hair of women from other ethnic groups, sell medicine and make embroidery and jewellery (Bovin 1990; Swift et al., 1984; Wilson 1992). The making and selling of jewellery is particularly interesting in analysing WoDaaBe conceptualisation of westerners,

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6 *Anthropology Today* had a very interesting debate on the issue of the relationship between anthropologist and the people they studied (see, for example, Hardiman 1998; Lewis 1998: de Waal 1998).

7 The average Nigeriens are kept away by high prices for drink and food.

8 Only those classified under natural resources were included in the report.

because westerners are the main clients for these products. Some WoDaaBe men sell jewellery directly to tourists and expatriates in Niger, while others sell items either to other WoDaaBe or to middle-men of other ethnicities engaged in the artisanry business. Women make embroidery, which they sell to WoDaaBe middle-men or make at the request of their husbands or other family members. They also often assist with making jewellery, often being paid a small sum. In my experience, WoDaaBe women did generally not sell directly to tourists but more frequently to western women based in Niger.

The WoDaaBe artisanry can be classified as tourist art, because it is made specially for tourists and foreigners from western countries, but other production of objects defined as exotic tourist art has to do with historical relations of power (Clifford 1985: 244). Authenticity has always, says James Clifford, been of great concern to art collectors, who hierarchically place objects most influenced by 'modernity' as those least authentic (Clifford 1988: 224). WoDaaBe engaged in artisanry often engage in selling other products such as traditional WoDaaBe clothing, household items and traditional performances, the same performances that have been heavily popularised in the media of the west in recent years (Loftsdóttir 2000). WoDaaBe artisanry can be compared with Tuareg artisanry which has taken place in Niger for a long time, and, as studies indicate, is closely connected with colonisation and power (Davis 1999: 488), involving various issues of problematic relationships with westerners (Rasmussen 1995).

At the same time as WoDaaBe have experienced a growing economical marginalisation, their images, especially in relation to their dance-gatherings, have become increasingly popular in the west, emphasising them as exotic and untouched by the outside world. These images can be seen as increasing the potential markets for WoDaaBe products (Loftsdóttir 1997). The relationships established between the western world and WoDaaBe is thus complicated and ambiguous, intersecting various themes of power, desire and objectification (see discussion in Loftsdóttir 2000; Loftsdóttir forthcoming).

Even though my own ethnic identity is shaped by coming from a small nation, small both in regard to its population and in terms of world politics and power, my position in the world is still marked by my definition by the outside world as being 'white' and having origin in a homogenous category, the 'west'. I am using the concepts 'west' and 'western' here as relational terms, constructed in opposition to non-western others. Frankenberg states that 'westerness implies a particular, dominative relationship to power, colonial expansion, belonging to centre rather than margin in a global capitalist system and a privileged relationship to institutions' (Frankenberg 1993: 265). In addition, the fact that my country is small and situated outside major world politics, strengthens in some aspects my position in the larger world. I can benefit from the privileges associated with an origin from the west, despite my native country not being so much associated with the negatives of imperialism compared to the more dominant players in world politics. My categorisation as 'from the west' gives me access to various resources, thus being from the 'west' constitutes a certain reality, giving one access to things merely because one occupies this imaginary space of identity.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's book title, *Woman, native, other* (1989), refers to other dimensions of otherness and marginality. Following Peggy Gould's edited volume, *Woman in the field*, many writers have explored the various dimensions of gender in fieldwork

situations.[9] Several studies have emphasized the difficulties of women ethnographers in relation to vulnerability to sexual assaults (Moreno 1995; Willson 1995), leading to the need to situate themselves within the community of study with protectors. Peggy Gould points out, that women's techniques of increasing their own security involves:

> [F]inding a man or men whose role enables them to serve as protectors; moving in with a family; taking or being assigned an already existing role that minimises or neutralises sexuality or is traditionally a protected one, as 'child,' 'sister,' 'grandmother': working chiefly with the women and children of the community or living in the field with a husband or a team of fellow workers. (Goulde 1970: 6)

We should not forget that sexual harassment and violence are part of most ethnographers' social environment at 'home'. If it becomes more acute during the fieldwork, it is due to them being cut off from their normal net of protection, in addition to being in a new environment and thus less able to minimise risks. To my best knowledge, it has never been adequately explored to what extent a woman's vulnerable position minimises her relationship of power (as derived from her whiteness or position of privilege) in relation to those subjected to her research.

Constructions of race and gender in WoDaaBe society

WoDaaBe characterise human pigmentation, as identified by Dupire in her research in 1962, using the terms *bodejo* (black), *bamalejo* (dark-red, a term generally not used by the ethnic group I studied) and *balejo* (red). Dupire mentions that the more sedentary Fulani use the fourth term *danejo* to refer to white skin colour (Dupire 1962: 7), but her discussion implies that WoDaaBe did not use such a term. According to my study in the Tchin-Tabaraden area in Niger, the WoDaaBe had minimal direct contact with colonial powers at this time, which may explain the lack of such identification. For contemporary WoDaaBe, the category 'white' (or westerner) has become increasingly important, usually referred to as *anasara* or, less frequently, *Turankedjo*. The term *anasara*, probably originating from Arabic, is used by various ethnic groups in Niger. Tylor's dictionary defines the term (spelling it as *Nasaradjo*) as referring to a 'Christian' (Tylor 1995 [1932]: 147) but other Fulfulde dictionaries reflect, however, the general present-day use of the term as referring to a 'white person' (there written as *annasaara*) (see Osborn *et al*. 1993: 522; CRDTO 1971: 22).

The use of the term *anasara* is not completely coherent. In some cases, the term seems to imply westerner, being occasionally used for African Americans, even though some WoDaaBe directly stated that the term could not be used over people with dark skin colour.[10] The term is, however, often used over Asians, who are as westerners associated with power, probably due to their similar kind of presence in Niger within development institutions and tourism. The concept *anasara* does not thus completely correspond to western conceptualisations of whiteness nor to westerners, even though it often applies to these social constructs.

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9 Interestingly enough, women ethnographers appear to have been much more active in exploring the effects and limitations of their gender on fieldwork than males have been.
10 In cases where people had interacted with westerners seen as people of colour, it was somewhat inconsistent whether or not they were referred to as *anasara*. In some cases, WoDaaBe said to me when talking about someone: 'She is an *anasara*, but not a true one because she is black'.

The concept seems, to some extent, to be used as an ethnic term, reflected when people talked about 'my' relatives (*bandirabe*), referring to English- or French-speaking westerners, or when defining my skin colour as 'red' like their own skin, which contradicts, of course, their claims of me being *anasara* and thus different from them. The category *anasara* carries a clear association with power, and as such I carry, to many WoDaaBe, hopes of development projects or minor assistance. Even though many have exaggerated views of these possibilities (believing in my case that I could easily buy a car for my household in the bush or finance the building of a well for them) it should be kept in mind that these conceptions are based upon WoDaaBe previous encounters with *anasara* in Niger, many who work in positions of authorities in development institutions or are tourists enjoying their leisure time. A WoDaaBe woman close to me found it hard to believe that my mother, to give one example, did housework at my parents' home, due to this woman's own experiences as working for many western women in Nigeria and always seing westerners using servants for such tasks. My information thus conflicted with her own life experience.

WoDaaBe relationship with westerners can be characterised, as earlier indicated, as fraught with ambiguity. Most WoDaaBe generally do not, however, express criticism within the context of formal interviews or in a hostile way, usually only within unordered and unexpected circumstances. However, as Dibesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, silence can be no less important than what is said, constituting an important aspect in reflecting people's conditions (Chakrabarty 1988: 179). The reason for a relative silence in this case can be sought in the interaction of various aspects, such as the absence of extensive direct confrontation between white colonisers and WoDaaBe subjects, thus westerners not being an important counter-identification in colonial times. Also, the moral rules of the WoDaaBe (referred to as *mbodagansi*), intrinsic to their ethnic identity, do not encourage confrontational criticism, especially not of visitors. In addition, the hope of 'gaining' projects, seen by WoDaaBe and other Nigeriens alike as a ticket for future prosperity, is probably also a significant factor, correlating obviously with aspects previously discussed: i.e. Niger's dependency on aid and the visibility of aid institutions in the country.

Despite not always being expressed in a direct manner, the WoDaaBe views of themselves as situated in unequal power-relations with Westerners are manifested in various ways. The identification of the category *anasara* itself by WoDaaBe, not identified during Dupire's research four decades earlier, implies the importance of this social category in understanding relationship and identity. Conceptions of power differences are also expressed indirectly in various interactions. To give one example, when WoDaaBe only marginally acquainted with me arrived at my small apartment in Niamey, they had to be told by WoDaaBe they trusted and who knew me well, that they did not have to stay outside, that they could safely enter inside, it not being enough that I invited them inside. This hesitation of entering the space associated with *anasara* probably has to do with many WoDaaBe fearing being accused of theft, something people clearly identified with interactions with westerners.

Criticism posed by WoDaaBe on westerners can be sharp, even though, as previously discussed, it is usually only expressed in unstructured contexts. Observing an interaction between an *anasara* and a young Hausa man leads one WoDaaBe friend of mine to tell me harshly: 'I am sorry [to tell you this] but all *anasara* people see us

Nigeriens as dogs'. The analogue with a dog is probably no coincidence because WoDaaBe, as many other Muslims, see dogs as impure animals, dirty, only fit for work, not to stay within one's home. I also relatively often heard criticism that evolved around aspects of development assistance. One man pointed out to me, for example, that *anasara* living in Niger get high salaries and live affluently among the poor people of Niger. He states, 'All this is done in the name of the project but hardly any money goes to the people they should be helping. Then afterwards they probably say that the money went into this and that'. He and his friend pointed out to me the big powerful jeeps belonging to various projects, driving past us on Niamey's streets, demonstrating this point.

The texture of the experience being *anasara* in Niger is generally smooth and gentle. *Anasara* sit down with the WoDaaBe and they are sure to enter into the Garden of Eden before the fall (as phrased by Taussig 1993). There is no evil in this world. Instead of guilt-laden stories of colonisation and power, they hear stories from WoDaaBe of how 'good' white people actually are, how much they have done to help other people. They will hear how beautiful their skin and colour is and how 'their people' are in fact the same as the WoDaaBe. They will also hear how much their friendship is valued and how much the friendship with all whites is desirable. No more guilt of colonial heritage, no more shame, no bitter taste of colonisation, power and inequality.

Moving from the WoDaaBe construction of 'racial' categorisation to gender – another social construct relevant to research activities – it can be stated that WoDaaBe society is based on strong gender segregation. In a society with few social differentiations, gender and age are crucial in creating different social groups. The term 'woman' in Fulfulde, the language of WoDaaBe, is derived from the root *dewal*, meaning 'service', or 'to follow'. (pl. *rewbe*, sing. *debbo*) (VerEecke 1989: 5). Women are generally expected to obey their husbands, even though WoDaaBe women are also well known for their independence (Dupire 1963 [1960]). WoDaaBe construction of gender is thus based on relationships of domination, where women are generally to be ruled by men (their fathers, brothers, husbands), even though women find various ways of resisting and manipulating their position. The life cycles of WoDaaBe women are roughly divided into child (*bingel*), young unmarried girl (*surbadjo*), wife (*jayridjo*) and elderly woman (*nayedjo*). WoDaaBe are polygamous and patrilineal. The *surbadjo* is from a young age promised (in effect married) to someone, but the marriage itself is only finalised when she has reached maturity (*kobgal* marriage). She is, however, free to seek sexual partners until her marriage and after her marriage she can leave the husband picked for her (*kobgal* husband) by her parents and marry someone outside her own lineage group. Males's social classifications, however, differentiate roughly a child (*bingel*), young man (*kajedjo*) a term, that can importantly refer both to a husband or unmarried man, and an elderly man (*dottitjo*).

The strong gender segregation in WoDaaBe society is reflected in the fact that men and women normally neither dine together nor socialise extensively on a daily basis. Riesman, reflecting on this gender segregation among Djelgobe Fulani, points out that to a stranger it may appear that men and women live in different worlds, children forming the link between these worlds, constantly running back and forth between men and women with objects and messages (Riesman 1974). Gender is given an ethnic dimension, women from other ethnic groups not necessarily being seen as required to behave in a same manner as WoDaaBe women. However, even though some difference

is seen as natural in the gender behaviour of other ethnicities, behaviour similar to WoDaaBe gender codes is still seen as highly desirable, these constructions of gender justified and explained by references to biology and religion.

A case study

My fieldwork took place within two different locations, Niamey, Niger's capital and in the pastoral area of northern Niger, both locations involving for me daily interactions and living, to some extent, with WoDaaBe individuals. It can generally be stated that at the beginning of my fieldwork, people perceived me to some extent primarily as a westerner, even though in certain contexts my identification as a female was important. As a foreigner and guest, I was not expected in general interaction to follow patterns of behaviour associated with women. When I came first to the bush, it was seen as a self evident that I dined with males, and spent the day with a group of men. Women showed much less interest in associating with me than males, and seemed generally to assume that I had little interest in their company. In this respect, my presence as a foreigner, as a white person, was dominant. During the night, however, I was not located within the traditional guest area (*daado*) outside of the camp, but placed within a similar spot as if I had been a wife.[11] I suspect this being seen as desirable due to my sex, probably to prevent sexual offers or assaults, and even also because of a sense that I needed protection as a foreign woman. This later concern was expressed in aspects such as people assuming that I would be afraid to be by myself, and expressing directly that I was their responsibility. Although, probably partly due to me being a foreigner, I think this was strongly linked with my female gender and, as I will discuss later, interacting with a growing conceptualisation that I was one of my kind in Niger. I suspect that people would not have conceptualised their role to protect me as much, or enacted it as forcefully, if I had been a male. In several cases, as discussed at the beginning of this article, I was prevented from going where I wanted, because it was considered not safe enough or too difficult for me.

   As my stay in the field extended, my identification with being a woman seemed to grow stronger, thus probably making me more of an individual and a person. Many of the elderly men no longer felt it appropriate to eat with me and people generally made increasing demands that I would dress in what was considered proper for a woman.[12] Even though I was able to do things that WoDaaBe women would not do, this more intimate personhood meant that I was becoming a more gendered person. I am here referring to the fact that people did not conceptualise me simply as being a foreigner or an *anasara*, but viewed me as a person with a particular identity and personality. Women, who had generally shown a lack of interest in associating with me, despite being polite, became more intimate and supportive, often positioning me with themselves versus males.

   The colour of my skin and my *anasara*-ness continued, however, to be a factor in

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11 The WoDaaBe generally do not use tents or huts but their construction of their homes is well adapted to the great mobility characterising their economies. A camp or a home, referred to as *wuro*, is composed by several *cuudi* (sing. *suudu*). Each *suudu* belongs to one wife within the household.

12 This coincided with the concern, especially expressed by women, that I should try to look 'beautiful'.

my relationship with people, interacting in a complicated way with my gender. Many WoDaaBe never seemed to stop hoping that I would be able to improve their lives in some ways, bringing them 'projects' in the forms of cattle, corn or the construction of wells, thus never forgetting that I was white. This association with power was still contradictory and at different moments different aspects of my identity were relevant. During rather formal interviews with groups of men, they would refer in one way or another to the power invested in my skin colour, and thus my presumed ability to gain access to these resources. In some cases, however, when an interview was over, I would slip from being seen as a rather powerful researcher, treated with respect and distance, into being a rather non-threatening female. Several times it happened when a formal interview with elderly men was over, that they would take my hand, inspect my fingers, even toes (not in a sexual way, but more as if I was a child), in addition to gently referring to me as a specimen of an *anasara* girl (*surbadjo anasara*). During my overall fieldwork, my gender and origin interacted thus in complicated and often confusing ways.

As described by Bawa Yamba, based on his experiences in West Africa, anthropologists are often treated differently in governmental institutions according to their skin colour (Yamba 1990:198). In such situations, I sensed how visible my skin colour became, not only to myself but also to those WoDaaBe accompanying me. My gender seemed, furthermore, to be less important than in other social interactions. My privileged position and ability to get an audience with people in high places was pointed out to me by WoDaaBe assistants. They were, when accompanying me, treated with respect in most instances by those working at these institutions and treated somewhat similarly to Yamba's description of his experience, as fellow Africans or Nigeriens. My companions were offered tea, and talked to in a much more personal and relaxed manner than what characterised the interactions of these people with me. I thought it particularly interesting that those working in these institutions sometimes talked in Hausa or Zerma to the WoDaaBe accompanying me, then, after having established that I did not understand these languages, usually asked them for general information about me which emphasised communality even more strongly, as well as gently pointing out to the WoDaaBe that they should be critical and careful of my intentions. This is interesting because WoDaaBe have tended to draw a sharp contrast between themselves and other ethnicities. Fulani, furthermore, have historically posed Hausa as a counter-identification to themselves (see, for example, Burnham and Last 1994). The identification of *anasara* indicates the creation of a new counter-identification, where WoDaaBe even place themselves alongside other African populations.

I discovered when staying longer in the field, that those most intimate with me started to see me not only as *anasara* or a westerner and a gendered person, but also as someone with a specific ethnicity. I shared with my closest friends during my stay in the field, stories about my family and native country that not only reduced my own sense of loneliness but helped create a common bond between us, them having in most respects different lives and experiences from me. In many ways, I think these interactions gave my identity as *anasara* a more rough and uneven texture, grounding our relationships within a particular time and space, simultaneously separating us from this time and space with symbols widely shared in human societies, such as belonging, separation, home and family. Many WoDaaBe found it interesting and surprising to hear that my country had once been a colony of other *anasara*, and when I told some individuals that individuals of my nationality had in the past been forcefully taken by

Algerians and sold in slavery in Algeria, they almost expressed contentment, as this information contested their previous views of *anasara*. Those WoDaaBe who interacted with me in the city contexts, also commented on my bad French grammar and pronunciation, taking pleasure in teaching and instructing me. In a few instances, individuals also commented on my English being different from the language of the Americans; clearly further confirming that my native language was neither English nor French.

Those who helped me with my research increasingly started introducing me to others, as originating from an island, which had like Niger been a colony and had its own distinguished language, thus trying in a sense to separate me from the French and the Americans. They started emphasising my ethnic identity more than my skin colour. Even some who had referred to other white westerners as my *bandirabe* (relatives), started stating that these were 'not my people' (*wana dum duuna ma'a*), thus not having stronger claims to me than members of other ethnic groups (i.e. these westerners having no more rights in directing or protecting me). As I have tried to underline, this emphasis on my ethnicity and colour cannot in many situations be separated from my gender, nor my gender separated from my skin colour. In a few instances, WoDaaBe males even warned me that other *anasara* were no more 'my people' than they themselves, that all men, black *and* white, had the same sexual desires for women and could thus be dangerous.[13]

Final remarks

Even though I have not attempted to explore in this discussion how different dimensions of identity are relevant in regards to the various ways in which fieldwork is conducted, it should be underlined that anthropologists conduct fieldwork in different ways, under various kinds of circumstances. It is quite important, in my view, to be conscious of the nature and texture of the relationships established in the field, not only because they affect data gathering but also because anthropologists need to be concerned with understanding their relations with the people who not only become a source of information, but companions and friends.

My discussion has limited itself to underlining how the binary division of us (the anthropologists) and them (those we make the objects of our study) in terms of power can be simplistic in the context of a fieldwork. Not only does it dismiss the idea that anthropology 'at home' has become important – 'home' referring to various social locations (continents, countries, ethnicities) – but examples, such as my own, where differences of power are particularly salient (between the anthropologists arriving from the more affluent west and a population increasingly marginalised within the world economy) show that such binary division is not the only aspect of importance in the actual interaction of people during fieldwork. The harsh distinction of 'self' and 'other' in a fieldwork situation can thus be redundant.

Fabian importantly pointed to distancing in time as crucial to the creation of other within an anthropological discourse (Fabian 1983), but it has to be emphasised that contrary to other research methods, extensive participant observation, where sharing conditions of living with those involved in one's study, involves very much an experi-

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13 I suspect that, ironically, they thought this would appear self evident to me with 'black' men, and I would be less likely to realise the 'hidden agenda' of white males.

ence of the same time, or coevalness, to use Fabian's phrase. Anthropologists have in fact increasingly, even though simultaneously problematising power, emphasised dialogue in ethnography, acknowledging that through the process of ethnography anthropologists are affected by their responding people (see discussion in Pálsson 1996), even though we have to be careful not to assume that it is necessarily a dialogue of equal parties.

This connects to ethnographic fieldwork not only involving communication through language but being an embodied practice where the anthropologists become both objects and subjects, learning through an actual lived experience. Ethnographic fieldwork does not involve 'taking interviews' in controlled settings,[14] but various situations in which the ethnographer is not necessarily in control and in which relationships of power become blurred and even reversed. I have limited myself to only two dimensions of subjectivity, 'racial' identity and gender, although not asserting that these are the only aspects of importance in a fieldwork situation. As the discussion has shown, my gendered identity interacted in a complicated way with my presumed racial and even ethnic identity and at different points of time certain dimensions of my identity were relevant. A part of the concern with the relationship of power embodied in fieldwork practices and ethnographic writing should be the realisation that the anthropologists' identity is never singular, but composed of various dimensions, interacting with power and domination in complex and situational ways.

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14 Again I want to refer to the different ways people conduct fieldwork. Any kind of fieldwork can, of course, occasionally involve such situations, and some anthropologists probably also structure their fieldwork in a way that it consists of such interaction.

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