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Intimate Saharan Borders in Crisis Times

Amalia Dragani

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Amalia Dragani holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris. She is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellow in a joint program at the Center for Global Islamic Studies at the University of Florida (USA), at the KU Leuven (Belgium) and during her one-year fieldwork at the LASDEL (Niger) (2020-2023). She was recently awarded a second Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowship in a joint program at the Laboratory of Political Anthropology (CNRS-EHESS) and at the University of Johannesburg (2023-2025). Her research interests are centered on the Sahara and the Sahel.

Abstract:

Previous studies on transnational intimacy in contemporary Africa usually focus on tourism encounters and prostitution practices. In contrast, the significance of these relationships for the humanitarian aid and development context has been largely neglected in scholarly attention, despite their current prevalence, especially in conflict areas and countries like Mali and Niger, where the tourist industry has collapsed. My research aims at filling this gap, examining the impact of interfaith and interracial marriages on the lives of humanitarian professionals and local spouses. The case studies drawn from the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in the Sahara-Sahel since 2004, will show that intimate relationships shape new humanitarian practices and discourses.

Keywords: Sahara-Sahel; Humanitarian aid; Love; Transnationalism; Mixed marriage

Intimate Saharan Borders in Crisis Times: Mixed Marriages and Humanitarian Aid Workers in the Sahara-Sahel.

Amalia Dragani, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

In this chapter, I examine the intimate transnational relationships that take shape in borderlands, focusing on case studies of interfaith and interracial marriages between development and aid workers and African partners in Niger and Mali. I argue that these intimate relationships are central to development work and help to shape new humanitarian practices and discourses, including those surrounding a key objective of contemporary humanitarian aid, that of “humanitarian transfer”, the transfer of skills, including data collection and analysis, report-writing, and similar.

The methodology used in this chapter draws on my ethnographic approach. My analysis of intimate relationships is based on first-hand data collected over the course of multiple fieldworks in North/West Africa since 2004, from both rural and urban contexts, conducted mostly with Tuareg, a Berber speaking and nomadic origin population, living in five African countries (Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, and Burkina Faso) and in the diaspora. I conducted fieldwork with Tuareg in Niger (2004-2007, 2016-2017, and 2021-2022), in Algeria (2010-2011), in Mali (2004, 2009, 2017, 2018), and also in Senegal (2013-2014), Burkina Faso (2004), and Chad (2020). I have also conducted fieldwork in Europe since 2007 with Tuareg refugees and migrants in France, Belgium, and in Italy.

My methodology combines various field methods, depending on the context, including participant observation and daily life sharing, accurate description of the setting, behavioral observation (kinesics, walking, dressing) and direct communication as spontaneous conversations and various forms of interviewing: biographies, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups (Bernard 2011; Schensul and LeCompte 2013). Because of my background in linguistic anthropology and oral literature, I have mainly used my interlocutors’ mother tongue, tamacheq, and other European languages spoken by the expatriate spouses. The technologies of fieldwork employed for this specific research were writing to keep records of the interviews and fieldnotes. Photography, sound, and cinematic recording captures were intentionally not used in this specific fieldwork for ethical concerns of anonymization, in order to avoid participants being put in uncomfortable positions. Because ethnography and intimate relationships are sensitive issues, in this chapter, names, places, nationalities, and other relevant details have been changed to protect participant anonymity.

It is also worth noting that this research was influenced by the circumstances surrounding my first visit to Agadez, northern Niger and the Aïr Mountains in 2005: although a PhD candidate in anthropology at the time, I was sent to Niger by an Italian development organization working in partnership with local NGOs based around Agadez (northern Niger) and the Tahoua region (central Niger). Niger’s severe food shortages were on the front pages of international newspapers at the time, and I had been dispatched on an urgent assignment to report on the living

conditions of the locals. This meant I was present at a key moment for Niger. As precarious security conditions brought tourism to a stop and Niger's European, Asian, and North and South American Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) started to attract massive funds for the management of the post-conflict situation, the expatriate community turned to these organizations for income.

This explains why *tourist* encounters gave way to *humanitarian* encounters in post-conflict Niger, and lends context to my research: some of the couples I examine as case studies in this chapter met when Niger still had a tourist industry (until 2007). Still others met as anthropology students at university; and others connected more recently while working in the humanitarian sector. The case studies I explore allow an examination of the differences between "first generation" and "second generation" couples: those formed before and after the collapse of Niger's tourist industry. My fieldwork confirmed that in Niger and Mali, humanitarians prioritise eradicating poverty and strengthening local partners in a setting with significant security challenges and instability due to terrorism, violent intercommunal conflict, and armed attacks.

To situate my argument about intimate relationships between aid workers and locals in the Sahara Sahel, I first provide an overview of relevant theoretical issues and developments in the anthropology of love and development. The chapter is then structured around four case studies, each of which engages with gender and borderlands in different ways: the first focuses on the connection between mixed marriage, the tourism industry, and humanitarian work in Saharan borderlands. The second explores the lived experiences of people living between different worlds at the margins of religious and sexual normativities in Northern Mali and Niger. The final two case studies draw out the connections between anthropology and humanitarian work. I discuss two opposite cases (an anthropologist who becomes a humanitarian and a humanitarian who professionally reconverts to anthropology), providing insights into two human experiences challenging the socio-cultural and sexual geographies in Northern Niger.

Transnational sexualities and marriage: colonial, touristic, and humanitarian encounters.

The social sciences ignored the emotions for a long time, considering them to be universal, biological, and innate phenomena (Darwin 1872; Ekman 1992) or subjective psychological events (Lévi-Strauss 1971). The marginalization of this object of study was compounded by the reason/emotion binary hiatus, underpinning the opposition of objective knowledge to the emotional sphere. Cultural theories of emotion only began to emerge at the end of the 1980s, in works like Michelle Rosaldo's *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life* (1980), on the role of emotion in the construction of Self; or Lila Abu-Lughod's and Catherine Lutz's *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (1990), a comparative study of the link between the emotions and social life (Lutz and White 1986). Interest in emotion and sentiment also intensified with the work of Henrietta Moore (1988) and the rise of feminist anthropology, calling attention

to gender differences and the impact of the sexuality and affectivity of anthropologists on their fieldwork practices (Ashkenazi and Markowitz 1999; Kulick and Willson 1995; Kulick 2011).

Ethnographic studies of love have typically been associated with specific contexts, for example the Americas (Rebhun 1999; Swidler 2001), Europe (Illouz 2007, 2012) and the South Seas (Gell 1996; Jeudy-Ballini 2010). In contrast, the persistence of prejudices associating Africans with hypersexualized representations meant that Africa had to wait until 2009 for its first ethnography of love, Jennifer Cole's and Lynn M. Thomas' *Love in Africa*. This book helped to widen the scope of African ethnography, traditionally confined to studies of kinship, alliances, and genealogy, or, more recently, AIDS. The surge of interest in gender and the history of women in Africa (Stoler 2002) drew attention to African women who entered into intimate relationships with Europeans during the colonial era, notably the "ménagères", "mousso", "signares", and "lavadères" of francophone Africa. Intimate transnational relationships between Westerners and their colonial subjects in francophone, anglophone and italoophone Africa have been widely studied (Barrera 2002; Jean-Baptiste 2010; Lauro 2005, 2011; White 1990).

While transnational intimacies continued to be investigated in the context of post-colonial Europe and North America, often with a focus on the sociology of mixedness (Varro 1995), this was not the case for post-colonial Africa until relatively recently (Padilla 2007). Studies of post-colonial African forms of transnational intimacy initially focused on sexuality, notably male and female prostitution practices (Fouquet 2011; Salomon 2012), and studies of seduction practices of local development managers in Agadez, Niger (Dragani 2009) or of Moroccan desert guides (Cauvin-Verner 2009). Transnational marriages in contemporary Africa have for the most part been examined through the lens of tourism encounters (Desprès 2015). In contrast, the role of mixed marriages in the world of aid and development remains almost entirely unexplored, despite the prevalence of these unions in the humanitarian sector, especially in conflict and post-conflict situations in countries like Mali and Niger, where the tourist industry has collapsed.

My research contributes to the anthropology of North-South migration (Peraldi and Terrazoni 2016; Bradeloup 2016) and is informed by the "affective turn" in migration studies (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015). In particular, it focusses on the emotions associated with migration among migrants (in this chapter, humanitarian workers) and local actors. In this chapter I draw on the ethnography of humanitarian aid (Atlani-Duault 2005; Atlani-Duault and Vidal 2009) and development anthropology, as well as on research on "development brokerage" and the flip side of Africa's asymmetric economic, cultural, and social relationship with the West (Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk 1993).

Erdmute, or living in the borderland between tourism and development

The story of Erdmute, a German woman, who first met her Tuareg husband in 2002 in Iferouane, a oasis in Northern Niger, illustrates the close connection between tourism, humanitarian work, and international marriage in Niger's Aïr Mountains (Dragani 2009, 2012, 2015; Grégoire 2006;

Grégoire and Scholze 2012). Erdmute first visited Niger as a tourist in the early 2000s and met her husband, an older high-born Tuareg herdsman: he immediately struck her as an independent thinker, as critical of what he called the “neo-colonialism” of the aid and development sector as he was of French colonization. From a social perspective, Erdmute’s husband is less educated than she is but he holds a noble rank in his society while she is considered middle-class in her country. She repeatedly emphasizes her husband’s status, in order to both make it clear that she considers their Afro-European relationship as homogamous. She also draws my attention to the fact that her husband is older than she is, because this means that she is not one of those Westerners who chase after younger locals. In other words, her marriage should not be associated with “sexual tourism,” and she has nothing to do with the clichés surrounding older Western women and young black men (Salomon 2012).

Although she imitates many of the aesthetic practices of his husband’s community (she has gained weight, wears a skirt called “pagne”, and looks much like a Tuareg woman minus the long hair), Erdmute’s stance on religion has not changed. She is familiar with the religion of her husband’s family, but she is not a convert to Islam and she defines herself as an atheist. Her husband’s intellectual independence has its positives: he is not troubled by her atheism or lack of interest in adopting local religion. He has not attempted to convert her or even to teach her his language: “In our relationship, we are both allowed to be ourselves”, she says. After the marriage, probably because of her atheism, it took a long time for Erdmute to be accepted by her husband’s relatives: neither her wedding nor her pregnancy was enough for her in-laws to welcome her into the family. They only softened their stance a few years later, when she continued to stand by her husband despite the life of daily hardship that followed his car crash, which led to health problems.

Her husband’s forthrightness, critical spirit and high social rank meant that he seemed not to tick any of the boxes associated with the “chasse touristes”, a local French phrase for the unemployed locals who “chase” after tourists in order to sell them services or manipulate them for money. Wealthy tourist chasers are often accused of swindling people or engaging in informal prostitution in exchange for material goods. Erdmute liked the fact that her future husband did not look like a “chasse touriste” or a “development aid broker” arranging the transactions between international donors and funders, aid workers and populations (Bierschenk, Chauveau, Olivier de Sardan 2000). Nevertheless, she seems to have come under significant pressure to explore a career in humanitarian work in the borderlands. Strings were pulled to recommend her to various aid and development NGOs in Northern Niger and in Niamey, although she does not have any specific qualifications for humanitarian work, having only entered this field through her husband’s local network. During her humanitarian career, her status as the wife of a local also gives her access to privileged information unavailable in the press or not yet public knowledge. She links her marriage to a member of an ostracized minority group often in conflict with the State to the fact that she has only ever worked for small NGOs and been bypassed for more senior positions: the Tuareg have launched two separate independence movements in recent years (1990-1997 and 2007-2009) in Niger. Professionally, she regularly comes under pressure to

justify her decision to marry her husband, his activities, and the political choices of his family and is now thinking of switching to another sector.

Erdmute's story shows how those in intimate relationships negotiate the borderlands of cultural, religious, and sexual norms. In this case, Erdmute's tourist visit and her subsequent relationship and marriage led her to the humanitarian sector, aided by local networks, and the local knowledge she gained from her marriage has benefited her work.

Pauline or “Marrying the driver”: living through borderlands, religious and sexual geographies

Pauline, a Belgian woman in her forties, met her husband, a man of mixed Tuareg and Bambara heritage, in Timbuktu, Northern Mali, while working for a small NGO where he had a job as a driver. Pauline and her husband have four children from their long marriage. Pauline believes that what predisposed her to a mixed marriage, challenging religious and socio-cultural norms, was not her non-immigrant family heritage but the socially mixed schools she attended as a child growing up in the Brussels' periphery, as well as her experiences of working for NGOs in Africa.

Pauline says she has always dated Muslim men, even before she went to work for NGOs in Africa. In her twenties she first found work in Senegal, then travelled to English-speaking Africa (where mixed relationships are rare, according to her), before moving to Timbuktu in Mali, taking a position at the Spanish NGO where she met her future husband. Pauline's boss disapproved of his employees entering into an extraprofessional relationship, fearing damage to the serious reputation of the NGO. As far as Pauline is concerned, this appeal to professionalism revealed that her employer was a “macho” southern European male who would have liked to control his subordinates outside of working hours. However, the villagers also did not take kindly to her relationship with her future husband and it was revealed that he had made another woman pregnant. When the child was born, the driver, who was a polygamist, married the mother, and for a period of time Pauline had to tolerate this other woman, who went on to have a second child with her husband. The two wives were rivals and started to compete to see who could bear more children. Pauline had four children and her husband eventually divorced his Malian wife.

In 2012, the Mali war began and the family left for nearby Niger, settling in Niamey, where Pauline works for high-profile NGOs. She has recently accepted an administrative position at her country's embassy but plans to take her family to Belgium in the near future: she wants to settle in a rural area where she can send her four children to school and continue working as a consultant. There is no social homogamy in this relationship: Pauline's husband is less educated than she is. As she explains with a chuckle, “It is a classic case of the woman who married her driver.” But although she never really learned her husband's language, she has converted to his religion, which she practices reciting Muslim prayers, although her dress is still Western, at least in public. Pauline is well-acquainted with local mores, mentalities, and representations of gender difference in Mali. This has allowed her to integrate within local networks, which in turn has

helped her with successive work contracts. Even though she was forced to flee Mali when war broke out in 2012, her professional skills and her husband's network enabled her to land on her feet in Niger.

Pauline's case, in which NGO work was the setting for the development of a mixed relationship, offers a lens for understanding the many contexts in which mixed marriages emerge. Pauline's story reveals the ways in which these intimate relationships are not only shaped by but also lend complexity to Western understandings of marriage and sexual and religious conduct.

The blurred line between anthropology and humanitarian work: the cases of Jérôme and Isabel

European expatriates in mixed relationships can often have either a background or a future in anthropology. Some of the life stories I have collected involved doctoral students or doctors in anthropology who abandoned their research in favor of international aid work, because this made it easier to settle in Africa. Others were humanitarian workers who had turned to research, often in development anthropology, because they had serious misgivings about the aid and development sector and did not believe that their work was making a difference. In both cases, having experience of a mixed relationship can have a decisive influence on an individual's professional trajectory.

Jérôme is a Swiss citizen who gradually turned away from his career in humanitarian work over the course of his fourteen-year marriage to a woman from a high-born family from Ivory Coast. He met his wife in Iferouane at a time when Niger had a tourist industry and she was working in an arts and crafts center. His wife spent several years following him from one humanitarian posting to another, first across Central Africa and then to Switzerland, before they returned to Niger, where their four children were born. In Niamey, Jérôme started to have misgivings about his career. He was now living in close contact with his wife's family and believes that this was what made him "see the limitations" of humanitarian work. For example, he was struck by the reaction of his female in-laws to his work on a family-planning program: according to these women, prescribing the pill to young girls would merely nudge them towards prostitution.

Jérôme eventually decided to embark on a doctorate in development anthropology, which he hopes will lead him to a research position in Niger or Switzerland. He has helped his wife to train as a hairdresser and open a salon. He emphasizes the fact that his father-in-law is from a high-born background in Guinea in order to present his marriage as homogamous. However, he is fully invested in his role as the husband of an African woman and helps to support her family: for example, he has purchased taxi cabs for his brothers-in-law and is having a house built for his wife's parents before building one for himself and his wife and children.

But some of my research participants followed the opposite professional trajectory. This is notably the case of Isabel, a Spanish woman with a Master's degree in anthropology who works

as a secretary at an NGO. A humanitarian worker with a background in anthropology, Isabel was popular with the local population and NGOs alike when she came to Africa on assignments, because she always tried to speak the language, and adopt the local mores and diet. In short, she practiced a form of imitative behavior, a technique used by anthropologists to gain the confidence of communities in order to be able to work as participant observers. Isabel had a secret sexual relationship with a Tuareg man, who was the head of a Malian NGO. Although low-born, he was a university graduate (he studied development studies in Benin), the head of a local NGO (a position he shared with his brother), and the owner of two villas (one for each of his two wives). His brother also owned a tourist agency in Timbuktu, which was a significant source of income when Northern Mali had a tourist industry. The brothers' tourist agency and NGO shared the same staff (drivers, cooks, animators, activity leaders) and vehicles; their events also took place in the same village, which they managed to put on the tourist map.

Isabel's secret relationship developed over the course of a series of short-term humanitarian assignments in Africa, until it was discovered by her project manager, who asked her to resign on the grounds that sexual relationships with the locals are against the rules of her NGO. Isabel's colleagues rose to her defense and emphasized her valuable professional skills counselling the NGO to "close its eyes" to her transgression, on the grounds that the marital status of her lover meant their relationship was doomed to end soon. Isabel's illicit relationship ended a few months later: she claims it did not end for professional reasons, but because her lover was married.

Where Isabel has been able to use her academic and fieldwork training to enhance her work with the NGO, Jérôme has moved away from humanitarian work and turned to anthropology as his mixed marriage has opened up a space for him to understand the world through an alternative point of view. Living and working in sociocultural, religious, sexual, and ethnic borderland spaces, cases like Isabel's and Jérôme's complicate the rich relationship between anthropology, development aid work, and intimacy.

Conclusions

Although the relationships described above are different, with unique characteristics, over the course of my fieldwork with 45 transnational couples, common features emerged from my interviews and informal conversations. First, those who have personally experienced a mixed relationship at one point in their lives seem more likely to enter into a transnational marriage. The factors that can predispose someone to a mixed marriage include coming from a binational family, having immigrant parents, having recently experienced migration oneself, living in a transcultural neighborhood, or having had romantic partners from minority groups before moving to Africa.

As well as having a prior life experience of mixedness, the humanitarian workers I interviewed regularly observed that their transnational marriage had allowed them to acquire a number of professionally useful skills, as the four cases presented in this chapter demonstrate. Because their marriage gave them an insider's perspective on family life in the host society, they were in a

position to help tailor aid and development interventions to the local situation. Some explicitly correlated their professional success to their daily exposure to the culture of their spouse, explaining that their insights into the mores and religious beliefs of the local population gave them a better grasp of their cultural sensibility and helped them to avoid missteps.

Third, the case studies also expose the other side of international marriages: these relationships can often be perceived negatively (as in Erdmute's case), although there can also be a stark difference between their reception by colleagues and family members. Such relationships can sometimes come under attack in the workplace (as with Pauline's and Isabel's cases), for fear of the damage that unpleasant rumors might wreak on the reputation of the organization. In some cases, aid workers, especially women, were severely reprimanded by their line managers at the start of their relationship and had to see their partner in secret until their wedding. It worth emphasizing that unlike many other Westerners in Africa (those who work in business, for example) NGO staff members are often explicitly forbidden by their contracts to enter into sexual relationships with members of the local community, ostensibly the targets of aid. This includes remunerated sexual relationships, as in the case of prostitution, as well as those that take place between consenting adults. Interestingly, there is no sanction against aid workers having sexual relationships "legalized" by marriage.

Interfaith and intercultural marriages are not always welcome in the host society, especially when they interfere with the parents' plans for their children (for example if the family would have preferred a combined or endogamous marriage) or with the hierarchical structure of a traditional society (for example when the social background or physical appearance of the spouses is not the same). There is sometimes a perception that those who enter into a mixed marriage may be damaging their relationship with their wider social group. Some choose not to get married beyond the confines of their original community for fear that this might jeopardize their relationship with their family. As a result, mixed marriages are not particularly sought after by locals aspiring to become "development brokers". Indeed, these unions are not very widespread. The men and women who enter such marriages often already have a fraught relationship with their family, or are finding it difficult to readjust to life in Niger and Mali after spending time abroad. These marriages are almost invariably associated with a form of individualism, a desire to choose one's own path and be free of the authority traditionally wielded by the elders in African society.

Freedom of choice in matrimonial matters seems to be a guiding principle for these young persons: they place individual freedom and personal feelings above familial considerations. International exchanges, the media and urbanization have brought other ways of living in Sahelian and Saharan borderlands and are partly responsible for the current shift in mentalities and attitudes. Most of the young male university graduates working in the aid and development sector consider the local women to be too poorly educated and narrow in their vision of the world to make good mothers. In contrast, a Western woman would be able to transmit her language and hegemonic mentality to her children, opening the doors to the "first" world to them. These ambitious young men seem to feel that they must develop new strategies in order to realize their dreams and eschew the traditional matrimonial practices of their family.

The results of my research to date invite me to upend widespread prejudices, which suggest that locals who enter into mixed marriages with Westerners are “development brokers”, motivated by an opportunistic desire to profit from the development industry in the Global North. On the contrary, my research points to another, bolder and more thought-provoking conclusion, that it is in fact the Western partner who benefits from entering into a mixed marriage in Niger’s and Mali’s precarious security contexts. Whatever the outcome of the marriage, the forms of sociability associated with mixed marriages between Western humanitarian workers and local spouses help these foreigners to avoid the isolation that expatriates tend to experience, and is often exacerbated by their consumption habits and cultural orientation. My case studies demonstrate that a mixed marriage also gives the Western spouse advance warning of what is happening on the ground before that information reaches the media. In the case of Western humanitarian workers, this means access to local protection and better security arrangements when they travel to a dangerous area. Indeed, in some cases, marriage to a member of the local Nigerien or Malian population is what propelled them to leave Europe and make a career change in favor of aid and development.

Beyond the specific cases I have examined, my research allows for a bottom-up approach to humanitarian transition, taking into account the sensibilities and aspirations of young Africans and their Western partners, and revealing the complex ways in which their relationship dynamics both shape and are shaped by the development agenda. It paints a clearer picture of Niger’s youth and the role they play as intermediaries between European professionals and the poorly-educated local population. In particular, this chapter shows that they do not perceive a career in the humanitarian sector as a way to give a slice of the “development pie” to their families, so much as a way to escape the constraints of their traditional background, without having to leave a country where they nevertheless enjoy a privileged position. Exogamous relationships, existing on the borderlands of different sociocultural positions, can provide distance from their families’ demands and experiment with achieving greater individual freedom. Their outlook on these relationships tends to be positive, even when they end in divorce, because they believe that a mixed marriage is a more enriching, “creative,” and stimulating experience than a marriage arranged by the family.

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