

## Muslim Women Cultures and Movements in Sub-Saharan Africa

From being part of various patriarchal cultures to the much more women-centered cultures of the Saharawi and Tuareg where some matriarchal traditions persist, the cultures of Muslim women throughout the vast Sub-Saharan African region vary considerably. But even within broader patriarchal cultures, Muslim women have often carved out feminist or women-friendly spaces and created organizational instruments to help expand those spaces.

In many parts of Africa, women play the role of the guardians of tradition within their respective cultures. Among the main reasons for this is women's often extensive knowledge about customs, rituals and religious practices because of their oral transfer of knowledge and also because of their role as the transmitters of traditional knowledge to the next generations. Rosander (1997:7) suggests that another reason is that in some societies women have frequent access to and consultations with the local *shaikhs* or *marabouts*.

Most obvious in terms of the use of culture and tradition by women have been the roles of women in various Sufi *turuq* (or paths, sing. *tariqa*) throughout Africa. The centuries-old Sufi *turuq* in West and East Africa are fairly well-known: the Qadiriya in Northern Nigeria and East Africa, the Mouridiya and Tijaniya in Senegal. Perhaps less well-known is the phenomenon of women's spaces within them and within such *turuq* in Southern Africa.

Closely linked to the broader involvement of women within Sufi orders is the role they have played as teachers, as *dhikr* leaders in some cases and also as scholars. Probably the most well-known African Muslim female scholar is the Hausa woman Nana Asma'u (1793-1864), daughter of Shehu Uthman Dan Fodio, the leader of Northern Nigeria's Sokoto caliphate. She authored 55 works, was a poet, teacher and founder of the educational organization Yan Taru. She was not the only such personality, however. More recently, Sokhna Magatte Diop took over the leadership of one branch of Senegal's Mouridiya *tariqa* as khalifa, after the death of her father, leader of that branch, Serigne Abdoulaye, in 1945. Abdoulaye's wife, Sokhna Tabara Cisse was also a *shaikha* who came from a family of Gambian Mandinka 'ulama (Lake, 1997:225-226). Besides her public role, Sokhna Magatte Diop was also very assertive in her private life, having married a number of husbands, including Mouridiya leader Shaikh Ibra Fall. (Lake, 1997:246). And in Somalia, Dada Masiti is a well-known scholar-poetess-saint. Another Nigerian woman scholar who distinguished herself was Hajiya Maria Mai Tafisiri from Nigeria's Kano State. She is most famous for her exegesis of the Qur'ān.

Women have also modified a number of communal rituals to convert them into women-only rituals. In Somalia, women-only prayer groups meet regularly to sing *sittaat* (hymns) to prominent women in Muslim history (Kaptein, 2000:244). Women-only *gaddat* and *dhikr jamaahs* that meet regularly to recite *dhikr* and sing *qasidahs* are popular in some sections of the South African Muslim community.

Beyond formalized cultural tendencies inherent in the Sufi *turuq* and other such formal entities, women have also managed to carve out spaces for themselves and which help to create women's solidarity and agency even within more patriarchal

cultural milieus. In such patriarchal contexts, women's most important roles are usually within the private domain. And it is in the world of rituals and activities that can be appropriated to the private domain that women take the fore and lead. Such rituals and occasions include, e.g., births, weddings and funerals. On these occasions, women are generally in charge the rituals. This trend cuts across cultures.

But more women-focused are some of the indigenous African Muslim communities that have traditionally been matrilineal. Although colonial and post-colonial laws regarding land, property and personal status within the family has been moving such communities towards patrilineal patterns, matrilineal practices still exist. An example is the Luguru ethnic group in Northeastern Tanzania, 85 percent of whose members are Muslim. The Luguru have largely maintained their traditional matrilineal patterns (An-Na'im, 2002: 43). Threads of matrilineal pasts also persist among the Saharawi and Tuareg. Saharawi women also have a tradition of repeatedly marrying and divorcing their husbands, divorced women are generally regarded as more desirable (Harter, 2003).

Throughout the sub-continent, there are also numerous examples of individual Muslim families which, although part of broader patriarchal cultures and while still adhering to the paradigm of such cultures, operate internally as matriarchal structures.

Political struggles across the sub-continent have helped women to emerge as powerful leadership and scholarly figures. South Africa's Fatima Meer, a close friend of Nelson Mandela, e.g., dedicated decades of her life to the anti-apartheid struggle and is recognized as a leadership figure among all South Africans. After the country's first democratic election in 1994, she committed herself to continue struggling on behalf of those whose oppression persists even under a democratic government: victims of landlessness, poverty, evictions and government's neo-liberal policies. In some parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, the rise of Islamist movements – which came long after the Sufi *turuq* – has helped in creating spaces for the education of Muslim women and has sometimes also thrust them into the public arena. Elite women of the Sudanese National Islamic Front rose through the Islamist structures to play prominent political roles (Hale, 1998). Suad al-Fatih, a vocal politician keen to open up spaces for women, emerged out of Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood movement.

While in some cases the rise of such Islamisms has had a negative impact on the public involvement of women, in other cases they have created opportunities for some forms of empowerment for women. For many Muslim women in the region, Islamism offers positive options insofar as education – Islamic and secular – is concerned. In Senegal and Nigeria, for example, Islamists have promoted the idea that women should be educated at all levels – even after marriage (Westerlund, 1997:323). In some contexts, when Islamist groups evolve and develop more progressive theologies, their Islamist education provides a starting point in their attempts to develop some forms of Islamic feminism.

Islamist groups, however, are not the only entry for Muslim women into politics. Throughout the sub-continent, there are Muslim women in various state jobs: ministers, officials in offices of heads of state. This is also true in Muslim minority contexts. The speaker of South Africa's upper house of parliament, for example, is a Muslim woman.

But women in the sub-continent have not restricted their activities, as women, to cultural, traditional and Islamist structures and activities; they have also formed a number of organizations and movements in order either to play a social role and / or to take forward the agenda of gender justice. A plethora of women's organizations exists all over the region fulfilling a variety of social functions. These functions include the education of children and women, welfare and relief provision, women's self-help projects and counseling for women (and men). Many of such groups include professional women trained as educators, psychologists, etc, who volunteer their services.

As far as Muslim women's organizations and movements promoting gender justice is concerned, these include women that could be described as Muslim feminists, Islamic feminists, secular feminists (Karam, 1998 and Badran, 2002) or women's rights activists (who might not regard themselves as feminists) – the different descriptions pointing to the different ways in which such women relate to their Islam. The foundation for the vision of 'Islamic feminists' is Islamic scripture, wherein they seek models of gender justice. 'Muslim feminists', tended to pursue secular models for their feminism. For 'secular feminists', religion provides no hope for feminism and they separate their religious beliefs from their feminist struggles.

Virtually every country in Sub-Saharan Africa has some kind of Muslim women's organization – falling either into the social or feminist category and consisting of one or more of the above, whether Muslims are in a majority as in Nigeria or Senegal, or exist as minorities as in Burundi or South Africa.

One of the largest Muslim women's organizations on the sub-continent is the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN), consisting of over 500 affiliates across Nigeria. Founded in 1985, the federation aims at 'improving the lives of Muslim women and children in particular and Muslims in general' (IFH website). The organization's activities span a wide area. It provides a number of social services to Muslim women and families, like its nursery and primary schools, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health education program and training of traditional birth attendants. It also plays a political role, having mobilized its vast membership to monitor state and presidential elections. FOMWAN is also forthright in its belief that Muslim women's rights need to be promoted and fought for – from within the Islamic paradigm (Bilkisu, 2002). It is not, however, as radical as the more feminist Yeewi Yeewi (Mama, 1996) in neighboring Senegal.

A group working in a number of Muslim countries in the region is Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). While WLUML is not a Muslim organization *per se*, a number of Muslim and secular feminists are associated with it. The network's office for Africa and the Middle East is in Nigeria, hosted by Baobab, an organization that attained international prominence with its championing of the cause of women charged with adultery and fornication in Nigeria's northern states where 'shari'ah' has been implemented. WLUML focuses on the mistreatment of women (Muslim and non-Muslim) living in countries where some aspects of Muslim laws are implemented – especially countries where Muslim Personal Law is part of the legal system.

The question of the prejudice faced by Muslim women under various different versions of Muslim Personal Law has given rise to a number of groups in the Sub-Saharan region. Some of these are research-based and focus exclusively on personal law issues. Some are not specifically Muslim organizations but take on Muslim Personal Law issues in countries where such laws have been codified. Others are decidedly Islamic feminist organizations. In South Africa, where certain aspects of Muslim Personal Law are to be codified in the country's secular legal system, a group of professional women calling themselves Shura Yabafazi (twinning the Arabic *shura* (consultation) with the Xhosa *yabafazi* (of women)) have campaigned for a women-friendly version of Muslim Personal Law. Also in South Africa, the national Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk, established in 1993, has been agitating for a feminist interpretation of Islamic scripture with its 'Campaign for a Just Muslim Personal Law' and its research and campaigns to improve the access of women to Muslim public institutions, for women's 'equal access' in mosques, and its divorced women's support group, among others (Jeenah, 2001).

In East Africa, the Uganda Muslim Women's Association too works on issues of women's rights – particularly those of Muslim women. And, in a country where ethnicity is an important part of identity, it has been successful in bringing together Muslim women from different ethnic groups.

In general, Muslim women on the sub-continent, while living under sometimes severe patriarchal traditions and Islamic and cultural practices – like female genital mutilation and stoning to death for adultery – have nevertheless succeeded in carving out important spaces for themselves to exercise agency, develop various women-centered cultural practices and forge organizational forms for themselves.

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