

Book Reviews

Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality, and Law

Margot Badran, ed.

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Gender and Islam in Africa is a great contribution to the scholarship on African women. The contributors, all of whom come from different disciplines, seek to elevate the status of women by promoting gender equality, human rights, and democracy in androcentric African societies. They appeal for more women to participate in the reshaping and reforming of women's roles; assert that women were part of Africa's development; and maintain that male religious scholars who interpret Islamic religious texts in a way designed to relegate women to second-class status, as opposed to Islam, are the primary cause of women's predicaments. This work is divided into three major sections: "Women Re/produce Knowledge," "Re/constructing Women, Gender, and Sexuality," and "Shari'ah, Family Law, and Activism." The contributors cite many examples of female scholars, among them Nana Asma'u and Malama Aishatu Dancandu, and their production of knowledge before and after colonialism.

In chapter 1, Beverly B. Mack discusses Muslim women's knowledge production and how Islam has called for gender equality since its inception. She details the scholarship of Nana Asma'u (1793-1864) and argues that Islamic knowledge covers both written and oral forms. This daughter of Usman dan Fodio was a scholar, poet, leader, and educator who had a great impact on subsequent generations of West African women. In chapter 2, Ousseina D. Alidou discusses women's role in democratizing Niger after its independence. Under colonialism, women were marginalized and relegated to second-class citizenship. After the 1990s, they were able to play prominent leadership roles due to those Islamic organizations that educated women outside the public schools. Some of these women were Malama Aishatu, a champion of women's right, public figure, Sufi, poet, and television and radio commentator. She uses her songs and poetry to promote girls' and women's education and remaining in school. She is the "griotte of Islam" (p. 63).

Chapter 3 consists of Raja Rhouni's analysis of the history of Islamic feminism in the 1990s. According to her, Islamic feminism refers to rereading the Islamic texts from a gender perspective in order to attain social justice for all. She argues that applying the feminist approach to the *mudawana* (the family law code) does not amount to deconstructing this human-produced knowledge based on *ijtihād*, but rather to revising it. Rhouni adds that Mernissi's Islamic feminism offers an original contribution to the study of gender and Islam because her works engage and challenge traditional texts by offering various readings of the relative narratives in *tafsīr* and hadith works. Mernissi considers her approach to be a gender critique of Islam.

In chapter 4, Sa'diyya Shaikh asserts that the religious texts accord men and women equal treatment of moral and social justice. She challenges the interpretations of Qur'an 4:34 and elucidates how different scholars have given different meanings to it. She argues that modern *tafsīr* should take into account gender justice, universal human rights issues, and women's dignity when reading the texts. Her conclusion is that the narrow textual interpretation given by male scholars should be blamed for the abuses of women. Lidwien Kaptehins, in chapter 5, explains how Somalia strove to free itself from French, Italian, British, and, finally, Ethiopian colonial rule. After sketching the country's history, she relates how, in the 1960s and 1970s, its women developed identity songs to enhance nationalism, anti-colonial sentiment, and the voice of freedom. These songs, produced as discussions between men and women, were the women's jihad to regain their identities.

The story of Gambian Muslim female members of the Jama'at Tabligh, presented in chapter 6 by Marloes Janson, reveals their active participation. They traveled to neighboring cities to invite others to join the Tabligh and assert their identity through the knowledge received during their training sessions. Proud of their roles, they do not perceive their marginalization by men as discrimination, but rather as an empowerment to do what they want to do separately. Janson fails to mention whether these women have been abused by their husbands and how they manage such abuses.

Heike Behrend, in chapter 7, analyzes how the "Titanic" movie was adopted to Africa and Hausa film. She explains the history of film production in Northern Nigeria and the innumerable problems the filmmakers encountered. While the remake of the "Titanic" projects gender equality for the Hausa audience, the Africanized remake received very negative evaluations; failed to achieve its goals; and was wrongly perceived as plagiarism, corruption, and the pollution of Hausa culture. In chapter 8, Margot Badran discusses how the Shari'ah began to be reapplied in Northern Nigeria in 1999 and how this has affected women's rights and equality before the law. Citing the cases of

Amina Lawal and Safiyatu Hussein and the unfair treatment they received at Shari'ah courts, she applauds African feminist groups for opposing the decision: death by stoning. It should be pointed out, however, that the Shari'ah has been present in Northern Nigeria since the nineteenth century.

In chapter 9, Corinne Fortier explicates how Mauritanian women assert their equal rights in marriage and divorce through Maliki law. For example, they can insert any clause that they want to into their marriage contracts, especially that their husbands cannot take another wife. But this clause only leads men to contract secret marriages that are accommodated by society. Julie E. Pruzan-Jørgensen, in chapter 10, illustrates the processes that led to the reform of the family law code in Morocco and how many women organizations cooperated to achieve this goal. In 2003, King Mohammed VI finally approved the reform; it was implemented the following year. The new family law code marks a landmark victory, for it grants Moroccan women many rights in the area of gender equality and liberation. Many observers, however, argue that this process does not reflect any democracy because the king has to endorse everything. The process of democratization exists only where the political leaders/kings are held accountable for their deeds. In Morocco, the king still cannot be held accountable or challenged.

In chapter 11, Benjamin F. Soares discusses the attempt to reform the Malian family law code that, since the country's independence, has not recognized Islamic marriages. Although Mali is a Muslim country, its government is purely secular and disregards Islamic law. Every government that assumes power promises to reform it, but this stated goal remains unrealized. The government shows a strong reluctance to recognize such marriages. Rashida Manjoo, in chapter 12, dwells upon South Africa's attempt to endorse Islamic marriages. The lack of such recognition has led to many negative consequences, such as abuse and oppression. A draft of a Muslim Personal Laws code was made in 2003 and presented to the Minister of Justice in 2008. Until today, however, it has not been approved. Manjoo discusses several sections of the bill and offers her own interpretations, one of which is that it violates the doctrine of the separation of church and state. She perceives the accommodation of women's issues as backward-looking and harmful to the individual and the religion. She also states that the bill does not guarantee equality for women.

This book is a celebration of women's scholarship on gender issues. All of the contributors, with the exception of Soares, are women. They suggest that women should be leaders in addressing their own issues by advocating for equal treatment. This work is meant for specialized scholars, yet the public can also benefit from it. Manjoo's idea that recognizing Islamic marriages would amount to discrimination and thus constitute a violation of the South African

constitution is, however, rather odd. Such a conclusion is uncritical and biased. If every religious group in South Africa has the freedom to follow its religious teachings, one wonders why an Islamic marriage should be seen in such a negative light. It would indeed be a great recognition of equality if such marriages were recognized, just like all civil marriages are recognized.

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