

The example of Nana Asma'u

In predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria, women base their claims to education and employment on religious principles. For many, the practice of segregating the sexes (seclusion) is no insurmountable obstacle. Cultural change is underway slowly and unobtrusively – and quite different from what Western observers might expect.

By Katja Werthmann

In Western societies, the mere mention of "Women and Islam" triggers a chain of thought, which includes buzzwords like "Middle Ages", "veiling" and "oppression". Islam appears to be a patriarchal, authoritarian system, which is endured by women, but in which they have no say. Women's position in Islamic societies is either assessed by current Western standards or by those implicit in religious writings, neither of which leaves much room for the views of the women concerned. Significantly, this approach ignores the possibility that Muslim women might identify with their religion, and, nonetheless, develop and live according to their own ideas on their social status.

This also applies to Islamic societies in Africa. According to some Eurocentric views, Islam was forced on the people south of the Sahara. This religion is thought either to merely be accepted at a superficial level or to have uprooted and destroyed "authentic" religions and cultures. In this perception, the only active role women are granted in religious affairs is the one safeguarding traditions. They are thought, because of their poor education and predominantly conservative attitudes, to maintain practices that pre-date Islam such as cults of spirit possession.

In reality, however, there is no "African Islam". As elsewhere, Islam has many local varieties on this continent. Muslim populations and organisations differ considerably, even within a single country. That also applies to women's social status, educational opportunities or scope for activity. The like depends on urban or rural environments, family backgrounds, age, generation, marital status, et cetera. In the cities, women normally have better access to education, healthcare and political participation, but even here the gap between the social classes can be wide.

In the West, segregation of the sexes is regarded as typical of Islam, in spite of the fact that this practice was common in the Christian Occident not so long ago. Islamic societies by no means agree on the form that the segregation of the sexes should take. Historically, there has been constant debate on the correct interpretation of relevant suras in the Quran. The teachings are ambiguous, as becomes evident in the ongoing debates on whether standards of behaviour or dress are mandatory or only recommended.

Islam reached the Hausa-speaking regions of today's Nigeria and Niger in the 14th century and remained the religion of urban elites for a long time. Since the 19th century, a militant reform movement (jihad) and – interestingly – British colonial rule led to widespread Islamisation. Today, the northern half of Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, with a total of 50 to 60 million Muslims living throughout the country.

It is said that the ruler Mohammed Rumfa introduced seclusion for women in Kano (the largest city in the region today with approximately two million inhabitants) in the 15th century. At the start of the 21st century, married women in Kano are generally

expected to remain in their husband's house and to only leave it with his explicit permission. However, daily practice varies depending, for instance, on a family's educational background. On the one hand, there are nouveau riche traders who keep their wives in "gilded cages", and on the other, Western-educated business people, salaried employees and academics, who encourage their wives and daughters to study and work outside the home. People from poor social strata can hardly adhere to strict interpretations of seclusion. Rural women, for instance, have to work in the fields and go out to fetch water as well as fire wood.

Seclusion is not synonymous with a purely housewifely existence. With the help of their children or servants, many women are active in trades and crafts, the profits of which cannot be claimed by their men. Most women are in constant contact with relatives, friends, neighbours and even men from outside their family. Younger relatives, male friends or clients of their husbands, who are classified as "sons" or "younger brothers", have access to the women's quarters. Eliane de Latour's film "Contes et comptes de la cour" of 1992 dealt with the wives of a canton chief in Niger and beautifully portrayed everyday life in seclusion. This practice is certainly not an imprisonment. Divorced women, widows or post-menopausal women are not necessarily subject to seclusion.

Seclusion doesn't mean that women have no access to a religious or secular education. Until the beginning of the 20th century, women – primarily from elite families – looked back on a tradition of female scholarship. The best-known example of the pre-colonial period is Nana Asma'u, a daughter of Usman Dan Fodio, the intellectual leader of the 19th century jihad in Hausa land. In his writings, he repeatedly commented on the rights and duties of women. For instance, he stated:

"Most of our educated men leave their wives, their daughters and their female relatives ... to vegetate, like beasts, without teaching them what Allah prescribes they should be taught and without instructing them in the articles of Law which concern them... The men treat their women like household utensils, which break after long use and are then tossed on the dungheap. This is a loathsome crime. How can they allow their wives, daughters and female dependents to remain prisoners of ignorance, while they themselves share their knowledge with students every day? In truth, they are acting out of self-interest... Muslim women, do not listen to the speeches of those who are misguided, who sow the seeds of fallacy in the hearts of others. They deceive you when they preach obedience to your husbands, without telling you of the obedience, which is primarily due to Allah and His Prophet. They seek only their own satisfaction, and that is why they impose tasks upon you, which the law of Allah and His Prophet never intended for you alone. These are the preparation of food, the washing of clothes and other duties they impose upon you, while at the same time they neglect to teach you what Allah and His Prophet have in truth prescribed for you ..." (Kleiner-Bossaller 1993: 115)

Usman Dan Fodio very clearly says that obeying God is more important than obeying the husband. Husbands are not only obliged to take care of the material needs of their families, they are also responsible for the education of their wives and children. If they do not fulfil this obligation, women have the right and even the duty to acquire an education outside the home. Usman Dan Fodio practiced what he preached and all the women in his family, particularly his daughter Nana Asma'u, were highly

educated. Nana Asma'u founded a movement of educated women, who travelled from place to place teaching other women (Boyd 1989). Up to now, there are female scholars – for instance, members of Sufi orders – who initiate other women or organise pilgrimages to Mecca (Coles/Mack 1991).

Education and Employment

In the early 1980s, the American political scientist Barbara Callaway did research in Northern Nigeria. She was interested in the opportunities for emancipation within the confines of a "conservative Islamic society" (Callaway 1987: xv). She saw Islam as a rigid set of rules and regulations controlling every aspect of women's lives. Western education and political commitment were two areas in which she expected gradual change. Female academics in Northern Nigeria criticised Callaway's book as biased and Eurocentric. The Western-educated women that I interviewed (Werthmann 2000) expressed a variety of personal beliefs and ideas on religion in general. For instance, it was obvious to them that the way seclusion is practiced in Northern Nigeria does not directly relate to any rule in the Quran. While they did not cast doubt on Islam in principle, they did feel that equating Islam with Hausa culture was problematic and made it more difficult to manoeuvre between "tradition" and "modernity".

For a long time, it was not common practice for girls and women in Islamic Northern Nigeria to go to school or university. During the British colonial era, attempts to set up girls' schools met with resistance, as these were associated with Christian missionaries. In 1976, however, six years' school attendance was made mandatory for the first time and was widely observed. New educational institutions at all levels were established in the following few years. However, while many boys went on to higher education, marriage was still seen as the path to adulthood for girls. They were to marry soon after leaving elementary school. Nonetheless the number of girls and women enrolling in schools, adult education programmes and universities has steadily increased since that time.

Today, female Muslim students are a common sight at the Bayero University in Kano, even though very few are to be found in faculties such as technology or science. Many enrol in Islamic Studies along with the Arabic and Hausa languages. Other popular subjects are English, education and library sciences. The number of Western-educated, working women is increasing. Women are also joining political parties and human rights organisations. The umbrella organisation FOMWAN (The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria) consists of 150 organisations, which campaign against such issues as forced marriage, genital mutilation and – more recently – the application of the Sharia in Northern Nigerian criminal law.

Working women in Northern Nigeria justify their activities outside the home by referring to the teachings of Usman Dan Fodio and the example of his daughter, Nana Asma'u. Female academics define their aspirations to education as a service to the community rather than as an attempt to gain personal fulfilment. Women take Usman Dan Fodio's statements on the need for education one step on from their religious core to the secular, emphasising that only educated women can be good wives and mothers. Acquiring a Western education does not, however, mean basing their own lives on Western role models and gender norms. Rather, women try to modify their roles and the options available to them within the standard context of their culture and religion.

Every Western-educated woman I talked to answered "no" to the question whether women should work to earn their own living. They all stressed that it is the duty of the husband to provide for them. Women are not seen under any obligation to make their incomes available to their families. That view was also expressed by my neighbours in the old town centre (Werthmann 1997), who had a much lower educational background. Both groups agreed that, according to Islamic law, husbands were responsible for feeding, clothing and accommodating their wives and children. Neglect of this obligation was seen as a legitimate reason for divorce.

In Western societies, there is an ongoing debate on how education and work can best be balanced with marriage and motherhood. In this respect, the situation of Muslim women in Northern Nigeria is not that different. However, in a society where religion pervades every aspect of life, and religious conflict is frequent and violent, women have to develop specific strategies to make religious and cultural norms compatible with their individual needs. Women in Northern Nigeria are expanding their options by stressing their Islamic right – and even obligation – to become educated in order to live up to their family duties.

Incidentally, that is quite similar to how the protagonists of the early women's movement argued in Germany in the 19th century. They based their demands for women and girls to be educated on their role as mothers and educators of future generations. This was also how they justified the idea that women should become professional teachers. One difference between those women and Muslim women in Northern Nigeria today is that many early feminists chose not to marry or have children.

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