

Program of African Studies



COLLOQUIUM REPORT

Debating Islamic gender dynamics in Africa

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Northwestern University was the site of debates on Islam and gender in Africa when the fourth annual international colloquium organized by the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA) at the Program of African Studies convened from May 20 to 22, 2004. The theme was “Gender and Islam in Africa: Discourses, Practices, and Empowerment of Women.” While there have been many workshops and conferences on “gender in Africa,” the ISITA colloquium constituted the first major international gathering of scholars focusing on “Islam and gender in Africa.”

Gathering presenters mainly from Africa as well as from America and Europe, the colloquium became a forum for lively transnational debate. Presenters included a heady mix of those who have helped lay

of colonialism and beset by anxieties of transnational gender work at a moment when insidious binaries were still deeply lodged. Polarization was evident at the international women’s conferences convened during the UN Decade of Women (1975–85). Dissension also marked the nascent women’s studies emerging in the West in the late 1960s and early 1970s that theorized from the experience of privileged white women and was insensitive to colonial, post-colonial, class, race, and gender exploitation. The 1980s and 90s critiques of the limitations of early women’s studies and the spread of women-in-development (WID) studies, gender and development (GAD) studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies promoted rethinking of gender. Meanwhile, the rise of religious fundamentalisms produced new gender challenges and stimulated expansion of liberation theology and feminist hermeneutics as women spoke to each other across the divisions created by politicized religious identity politics inimical to all women. The study of gender and Islam in Africa (as elsewhere) can be located broadly in the context of these late 20th-century developments.

The study of gender and Islam in Africa may also be situated in the context of the rise of the new Islamic gender studies and in the now well-established field of African gender studies institutionalized in the ever expanding gender studies programs and centers in countries throughout Africa and in the (all) African Gender Institute headquartered at the University of Cape Town. While scholars and activists inside Africa are coming together from around the entire continent in shared scholarly debate, outside Africa the colonial sundering of the continent by a line drawn in the Saharan sand still orders the academic



the theoretical and epistemological foundations of African gender studies and younger scholars who brought their fresh work and new questions to the table. This transnational, transgenerational gathering offered a rich cornucopia of work on gender and Islam in Africa.

The fruitful collaboration aided by a shared theoretical repertoire and knowledge base was especially remarkable to those of us who had begun to create the new interdisciplinary field of women’s studies three decades ago. At that time, the world was still divided by the remnants

division of labor all too often. The splitting of “supra-Saharan” Africa (this apposite term alone offends the sensibilities) and sub-Saharan Africa (a term long “naturalized”) results in a skewed and truncated view of the study of Islam in Africa.

When Africa is looked upon as a whole, as the ISITA colloquium did, a new picture emerges. Over the centuries the flows of Islam to and fro along land and water routes in Africa mixing with the rich alluvial of local cultures have produced dynamic patterns of religion, culture, and gender. What ideas, beliefs, and practices about gender are Islamic? What is Islamic and who decides? On what basis? Who are the authorities? How do politics, culture, and economics come into play? These are questions scholars of gender and Islam in Africa ask and try to answer.

The ISITA colloquium took up several overlapping themes that indicate current epistemological and theoretical concerns and point to future directions. These included women’s religious (re)interpretation; Sufism as a dynamic Islamic way of apprehending and experiencing gender; women’s expressive modes — (auto)biographical narratives, poetry, and song; multiple forms of gender activism and collective feminist struggle; Muslim law reform; sexuality and the body; forms of violence against women; and the gendered implications of war and displacement.

Colloquium papers examined diverse modes and contexts of gender activism. A study on Muslim Sisters in Sudan observed how women acquire agency within a state-supported gender-conservative Islamist movement as they sharpen their sense of gender justice through its absence, carve out their own space, and take initiative. A second paper showed how the Sudanese Republican Sisters fared within an Islamic movement that was gender-progressive but under state siege. Another paper examined two adversarial women’s movements in Morocco — one that promotes Islam as a guarantor of women’s rights and the other that operates within a secular universalist framework — analyzing how these antagonist groups construct their identities and politics of protest relationally. Two papers on the subject of gender activism could not be presented at the colloquium for reasons beyond the control of the invitees. One looked at South African Muslim women and men’s collective Islamic feminist activism, analyzing the transfer from national anti-apartheid struggle to communal

gender jihad (gender struggle). The other examined women’s networking within and beyond Nigeria, focusing on the efforts of BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights, the coordination office for Africa and the Middle East of the international network called Women Living under Muslim Laws, that is concerned with the implications of religious laws for women’s human rights. BAOBAB was at the center of the campaign that resulted — through a triumph of religious argumentation — in the acquittal of the Nigerian woman Amina Lawal, who had been convicted of adultery in a sha’riah court in Northern Nigeria and threatened with death by stoning.

While words and deeds as weapons of resistance are often meshed, as in the South African anti-apartheid struggle where home and front were virtually one, there are other instances where the distinctions between armed and unarmed struggle are sharper. Modes of women’s activist contributions to national liberation struggles that may simultaneously constitute forms of gender struggle — or may lead to it — were illuminated in various papers. Moving back in history, a paper examining women in the Algerian war of independence drew upon recently recovered material to provide an important new piece in the story of armed resistance in analyzing women’s militancy at the regional level. This new chapter, as the paper confirmed, needs to be taken into account in broader reassessments of one of the most protracted anticolonial





struggles in the continent. A paper on women's participation in the liberation struggle in Eritrea likewise expands the growing attention paid to women as active combatants in armed struggle. It showed how women and their bodies, in this case Muslims and Christians, are variously (re)figured by the state and liberation movements at moments of siege and in the return to "normalcy" and how divergent representations serve shifting state needs and patriarchal expectations. Yet another locus of gender activism and corollary of war and resistance struggles is the refugee camp, widely abounding in Africa. A paper forming part of expanding gendered refugee studies looked at experience in Sahrawi refugee camps in the contested zone of South Western Algeria. It demonstrated that women in these camps have experienced positive changes in gender relations during exile and argued that Sahrawi refugee women, aware of reversals that have occurred elsewhere, are determined to hold on to these gender advances after exile.

Considerable attention focused upon law — a perennial concern of Muslim women reformists. Lawyer, scholar, and activist Rashida Manjoo from South Africa in her keynote address, titled "Legislative Recognition of Muslim Marriages in South Africa," explored the complex pros and cons of opting for the introduction of Muslim family law in South Africa. Her highly nuanced talk, confronting the tangled skein of theoretical, practical, and political issues, adumbrated issues taken up by several participants. Presentations demonstrated how the deployment of the disparate discursive and ideological modes — secular discourse and religious discourse (themselves variously inflected) — may obscure underlying commonalities and, as one paper argued happened in Mali, exacerbate antagonisms that can eventually derail state-promoted reformist efforts. Another paper analyzed repeated state attempts

in Senegal to reform the national family law, which is based on Western-inspired modern law, and where the law preserves citizens' rights to choose among civil, customary, and religious law. Concerted state-backed efforts to effect a more progressive (secular) family law enshrining the dual headship of husband and wife, including equal parental authority in the family, were thwarted by competing secular and religious ideologies leading to the indefinite shelving of reform efforts. It might be noted that the recent changes in the Moroccan family law known as *Mudawwana*, which establishes joint spousal headship of family, were grounded in religious argumentation. Another paper looking at the Muslim Personal Status Code of Egypt focused on a single item of reform that was the successful outcome of sustained activist attention. This is the incorporation of *khul'a* into the codified law, a legal mechanism that enables a woman to end a marriage by relinquishing all financial claims on her spouse. Unwritten law holds sway in much of Africa, and a paper on Mauritanian experience illustrated how Moorish women pass on oral knowledge of Islamic law to each other and how they de facto take advantage of the *khul'a*, (that Egyptian Muslim women had to struggle so hard to have incorporated into the written law) and *'asma* allowing for the insertion of conditions into the marriage contract, which among the Moorish population is an oral contract.

Changes in religiously influenced law depend on Islamic (re)interpretation of religious sources, which in turn is intimately connected to sociopolitical issues of authority, legitimacy, and agency. Papers demonstrated various ways Muslim women are entering the interpretive arena long dominated by men and how they are becoming de facto authorities. (A deeper look at African history indicates a prior presence of learned and influential female

authorities.) A paper focusing on Niger discussed how a Sufi octogenarian poet, catapulted into public view as a television and radio personality because of her artistry and Islamic learning, disseminates gender-progressive readings of the Qur'an to a wide audience who accepts her as an authority.

While some women display highly visible forms of agency and exert wide public authority, other women assume control over their individual lives in less visible ways, as a juxtaposed analysis of autobiographical narratives of two Darfur women demonstrated. The women disclosed how they apply their own understandings of Islam to customize public and private lives for themselves while appearing to conform to convention. A paper dealing with women in the vibrant Swahili culture of East Africa looked at how Sufi women enter and reconstruct public space through poems encapsulating progressive Islamic gender ideas, which they recite to female audiences in their newly founded Sufi women's associations in the city of Mombassa. Yet another paper examined how popular songs in Somalia, drawing on a classic nomadic genre and harnessing Islamic language, in the second half of the 20th century became a highly public vehicle for producing a new culturally authentic yet modern new youth culture and observed its gendered implications. (The presenter also regaled colloquium participants with her renditions of a sampling of Somali songs.) Finally, an intriguing paper by one of the few male presenters showed how Sufism can be put to the task of the "deconstruction of the macho ego," as the study's title succinctly announced.

A set of papers demonstrated how gender-progressive Islamic discourse is marshaled to protect women against domestic and public forms of violence and danger. Wife battery has often been condoned or, as many would argue, encouraged by recourse to (regressive readings of) Qur'anic scripture. Activists now appropriate Islamic feminist hermeneutics to stigmatize behaviors "justified" in the name of Islam and to shame perpetrators, as a South African study disclosed. New Islamic feminist discourse is also being appropriated in the campaign to control HIV/AIDS in South Africa through helping to expose oppressive patriarchal practices perpetuated in the name of Islam that render women more vulnerable to the disease. A paper investigating two cases of Nigerian women accused of adultery, who were among the subjects of activist concern by BAOBAB, was concerned with why women are more often and more likely than men to be accused under the new sha'riah laws of northern Nigeria, implicitly and explicitly querying ideas and practices of sexuality. While the acquittal of the two women mentioned illustrated how a gender-sensitive approach to Islamic jurisprudence can result in the delivery of justice, it also demonstrated how Islam's ethical message can be subverted by political manipulation as well as the malevolent

implications of persisting negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims.

The foregoing survey of themes and questions indicates the breadth and richness of the theoretical and empirical work presently engaging researchers. Efforts are now under way to publish the colloquium papers, together with a selection of papers by other researchers, in order to share with a wider audience the scholarship that vividly shows how the study of gender and Islam in Africa has come into its own.

ISITA colloquium participants:

Oluwakemi Adesina, Abdul Kayum Ahmed, Ousseina Alidou, Margot Badran, Heike Behrend, Cynthia Bowman, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Nagwa Ali El Bashir, Elena Fiddian, Corinne Fortier, Sondra Hale, Asma Abdel Halim, John Hunwick, Lidwien Kapteijns, Heidi Nast, Rashida Manjoo, Penda Mbow, William P. Murphy, Mwanakombo Noordin, R. Sean O'Fahey, Zakia Salime, Ryme Seferdjeli, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Amsatou Sow Sidibe, Benjamin Soares, Nadia Sonneveld, Karin Willemse (The list of presenters' papers is available on the PAS web site, www.northwestern.edu/african-studies.)

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