

Islam and Cultural Interferences in the Lives of the Nigerian Women

Rafatu AbdulHamid (ph.d.)

Faculty of Arts Department of Philosophy and Religions, University of Abuja, Gwagwalada, Nigeria

E-mail: rafatuabdul@yahoo.com

Abstract

The belief among non-Africans is that no matter how committed an average African is to his religion (Islam or Christianity) he is still loyal to his culture and tradition sometimes at the expense of his faith. In other words, an indication shows that people's customary beliefs under their cultural and traditional ethos tend to have a strong control over them. In addition, experience has shown that the day to day practices of Islam in Nigeria have been influenced by cultural practices in different areas of women lives. Such areas include: belief in Islam, economic pursuit, political participation, acculturation, marriage and matrimonial relations, widowhood rites, child birth and so on. These cultural practices among others are responsible for physical and psychological underdevelopment of women and girl child and that in turn affects their input in the development of their nation. This paper discusses the negative cultural practices on the girl child, marriage, traditional birth practices and widowhood rites and their implications on the health and development of the Nigerian Muslim women in the 21st century. The methodology adopted in this research includes library research work, field research and academic analysis. These cultural practices unfortunately are mostly found in the rural areas where they are more severe than the urban areas. This is attributed to the relatively high level of education and modernity in the urban areas. Hence, the paper examines and brings out the relevant *Shari'ah* position on such cultural practices which cut across ethnic diversities in Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Culture in Africa is as old as Africa itself. It is the way of life of the African people that is founded on their existence. There are so many of these cultural practices that are harmful to women. For instance, Female genital cutting (FGC), Widowhood rites, son preference and its implication on the girl child, reproductive health rights, inheritance rights and so on. Onuwa in her article "Harmful Traditional Practices" describes these practices as those influenced by beliefs held by members of the society especially against women. In her opinion, they also account for the majority of incidence of violence against women (Onuwa 2002). However violence against women must be addressed as a National issue.

Muslims believe that Islam governs the entire life of a Muslim in all aspects such as politics, economic, social interactions, ethics and morals. Therefore Islam condemns cultural practices that are harmful to women and men alike. Our discussion in this paper will therefore focus on the girl child, marriage, traditional birth practices and widowhood rites in order to unravel Islamic rulings on such harmful practices that affect the health of women and girl child and hamper their contributions to the societal and National development.

2. The Girl Child

According to the report of Sada (et al), while researching on "promoting women's rights through *Shari'ah* in northern Nigeria" he stated that; a woman who is unable to bear a male child has a diminished status. Thus, it has been one of the factors that lead some men into a polygamous marriage. The report further reveals that, in Hausa parlance the common phrase dictating the general attitude towards birth of a girl-child is "*ba ayi komai ba, mace ta haiji mace*," meaning that "nothing is gained by a female giving birth to a female." The report postulates that, the preference for the male child is also ostensibly linked to competition over inheritance amongst the Muslims as the male child's share is double that of a female in Islam (Sada 2005). Sesay and Odebiyi added that, in the past, sons were believed to provide more economic support for the parents, while continuity of the family name depended on whether or not there was a male child (Odebiyi 1998).

Ogbuani argues that the "error and injustice of feminine incompetence begins from infancy," the family looks upon the male as a potential pillar while the female child is expected to respect him as the heir apparent. She goes further to say that, as female gender, there is a barrier to her academic heights because her sex disqualifies her from being invested in academically. Thus, the aspiration of a woman to attain equal social status with a man was frowned at. She, however, notes that the speedy growth of women in the world that is regarded as men's zone is their inner strength to remain committed in the face of adversity and that has aided them to attain great achievements (Ogbuani 2001). This harmful practice is still affecting the attitudes of the Nigerian Muslims nationwide, despite the *Qur'anic* condemnation of male-child preference. The *Qur'an* states.

When news is brought to one of them of the birth of a female child, his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief with shame, does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has.

Shall he retain it on sufferance and contempt or bury it in the dust? Ah! What an evil choice they decide on? (Q16:58-9).

Allah's command is clear in forbidding the practice. The female child has the right to life, love, sustenance, education and proper care. Thus, the girl child has gotten a very important and high place in Islamic society. Parents are duty bound to support and show kindness and justice to their girl children. Muslims have a responsibility to fear Allah and do the right thing and build a virtuous society.

2.1 Marriage and Matrimonial Administration

Marriage is one of the ancient traditions that Islam has inherited. It affirms marriage as one of the basic needs of man but rejects some primitive and ungodly practices that are used to characterize it as in the past. For example, marriage without consent of the women, marrying with unlimited number of wives that one cannot cater for, forcible marriage, inheriting one's step mother, etc (Omotosho 2007).

Islam has also done extensive reforms in the area of matrimonial administration with the sole aim of eliminating many ugly situations that have made marriage more of a burden than a pleasure for many women. A simple objective of Islam is to ensure that both marriage partners derive maximum benefit from their association.

However, one of the major obstacles that has impeded the progress of man towards freedom and peace is that of the bondage to his tribal customs and traditions, some of which have continuously ignored the basic human rights of others. The Qur'an 11:170 spells it out: "When it is said to them 'follow what God hath revealed'; they say: 'nay! We shall follow the way of our fathers. What! Even though their fathers were void of wisdom and guidance'". This explains why Islam devotes much efforts to family law.

Islamic reform has made it possible for men and women alike to free themselves from these obnoxious traditions and customs. Though the ability of an individual and a community to get out of local customs and traditions varies from one community to another. In Nigeria, the ancient tradition and customs which Islam has found not to be in the interest of man still prevail among many communities. Sometimes these take precedence over Islamic teachings.

In the area of marriage and matrimonial administration, there is hardly any community or tribe without its own fair share of unacceptable influence of custom and traditions. Traditionally, in Yoruba speaking areas, the dowry or *sadaq* belongs to the father or parent of the bride. This practice has not been completely eliminated by Islam, except among the educated ones (Omotosho 2007).

Also, in some parts of Northern Nigeria, *sadaqah* marriage (*Auren Sadaqah*) in which a woman will be bundled into a house of a man who neither sought wife nor prepared for one, continues in the name of Islam (Fatimah 2014).

The practice of *nagani ina so* which is widespread among Muslims in the North is more of a local custom than an Islamic teaching (Talatu 2014). The practice allows a woman who had attained the age of marriage to keep on accepting presents from many men seeking her hand in marriage only for her to return them after making up her mind on who among them she wants to marry. The danger inherent in the practice is that the quality and quantity of a particular candidate's present may influence the woman to pick her husband instead of his religiosity and uprightness that Islam advised a man or woman to look for in marriage.

In addition to that, the Prophet's (SAW) advice that "none of you should approach a woman already being sought by his Muslim brother" (Muslim n.d). which is intended to prevent hatred and ill-feeling between two Muslim brothers, seems to have been ignored. Even though the interpretation of the hadith varies from one school to another, they seem to have agreed that the woman should be left to dispose of the first application before another man comes in, particularly if the first candidate has not proved to be unreliable (Omotosho 2007).

Moreover, one finds also that some customs and traditions of Yorubas in respect of matrimonial administration take precedence over Islamic teachings. For example, the term *Iyale and Iyawo* go beyond ordinary nick – names. They have various implications. *Iyale* is the first or senior wife, while *Iyawo* means junior wife or new wife. Under Yoruba custom, the junior wife is responsible for cleaning of the whole house, washing the clothes of her senior with those of her husband. More still, she is responsible for cooking for the whole house and she has no power to serve herself a part of the food she cooked. It is her senior that is supposed to serve her, even the soup that she has cooked (Zulfa 2014).

Similarly, a junior wife is not expected to call by name any child of her husband that was born before her marriage to the man, no matter how small the child may be. The same is done for the children of the relations of her husband. In fact, there is a limit to what she can ask them to do for her without raising an eye brow (Saratu 2014). While one can understand those children who may be older than her, what about the younger ones? These cultures are still in practice up till today even among Yoruba Muslims.

From an Islamic point of view, the two wives are equal and should be treated equally regardless of their age, educational background and status in society. When one married a virgin woman he is expected to spend seven nights with her after which everything should be shared equally between them (Ambali 1998). If they live in the same house they are jointly responsible for everything on equal terms.

This does not in any way suggest that Islam has no respect for age. After all Prophet (SAW) was reported as saying: “He is not among us who does not care for our young ones or does not respect old” (An-nawawi n.d). The essence of this tradition is that it is mandatory on the old to care for the young ones and on the young to respect the older ones. What Islam is opposed to is exploitation in the name of age, seniority or customs and anything that leads to cheating in one way or the other is un – Islamic.

However, the Islamic teaching of mutual respect and non – exploitation seems to have favoured women, but, surprisingly, one finds that most Yoruba women still favour the traditional system. It appears that those who have suffered under the system would not want it to be eradicated after them so that they can seek revenge from those who are coming after them. Anybody who talks against it is seen as anti custom and a follower of alien ideas. So the practice continues except that modern women, particularly the educated ones, are using their educational advantage to liberate themselves. First, by making sure that they do not live in the family house and secondly, by insisting that they do not live together with senior wives whenever possible.

2.2 Traditional Birth Practices

There is the practice of *Gishiri cut* or *Yankan-zur-zur* (multiple cuts in the wall of the vagina). This practice is usually carried out in preparation for “early delivery”. It is mostly carried out on girls having their first babies and occasionally on grand multiparous women. Many traditional birth attendants undertake incision of the birth canal (*Yankan zur zur*) to enable the child to come out easily and in the process cut the woman’s bladder resulting in vesico vaginal fistula (VVF) or rectovaginal fistula (RVF) or both (Yarnap 1997). In addition, the women are forced to squat during labour. This practice is considered to be dangerous for mothers, the result of which is usually vesico vaginal fistula (VVF) Idyorough asserts that the national prevalence rate of forced squatting is 32.9% and as high as 86.6% (rate) in Sokoto (Idyorough 2005).

Culturally, it is believed that, *Gishiri* will prevent promiscuity, and it is also believed that if the head of the baby is allowed to touch the clitoris during delivery, the baby will die. According to Mandara, *Gishiri* cut is performed with the belief that it is a cure for a variety of ailments. These include obstructed labour, amenorrhea, infertility, pruritus vulvae and dyspareunia among others(Mandara 1995).

Complications include, pain, severe bleeding, infection. In some cases bleeding may be so severe that the patient will be taken to the hospital. There, doctors may wrongly suspect unavoidable antepatum hemorrhage as the victim is usually warned not to disclose what had taken place. As earlier on indicated, if the Bladder or rectum is tampered with during the cut, the women may end up having vesico vaginal or recto vaginal fistula or both (Yarnap 1997).

Hymenectomy (*Chire hakki* or *Chire belun gaba*): This is usually done on the seventh post natal day. This consists of excision of the hymen when it is considered too thick. It is also done by the traditional herbalist called ‘*Wanzan*.’ The reason claimed for this is that, if the thickened hymen was not excised, the woman could have sexual problems in marriage (Mandara 1995).

Some other harmful practices that pose a threat to the life of a Muslim woman who has just had a baby are: *wankan Jego* (bathing with boiled hot water) *kunu kanwa* (hot pap made of millet and potassium), and sleeping on a bed made of mud with hot coals underneath. These are common practices among the Hausas of Northern Nigeria. Some of the reasons for these practices, as this research has gathered, are that bathing with hot water reactivates the muscles and strengthens the body once again. It is the belief of the elders that this practice makes women healthy and stronger for more child bearing. It is believed that the hot water will melt the bad blood in a new mother’s womb and drain it out to avoid bad (offensive locma) blood. If the bad blood is not drained, it is believed that the woman will swell up (Saadatu 2013). It is believed also that the hot pap helps in the production of quality and adequate breast milk. In addition, the hot paps help to drain the remaining blood from the stomach and quicken the healing process in the stomach of the woman that has given birth (Mairo 2013). During puerperium (after delivery), a woman is asked to lie down on the mud bed with fire underneath as part of the treatment to keep the woman’s womb and expel the bad blood from her. These practices continue for forty days and above depending on the capacity of the husband (Lami 2013). It is important to note medically, that these practices have lots of side effects even though people are still carrying out these rituals in both urban and rural areas of Northern Nigeria. It has been proven that hot water is a major cause of hypertension among adults in the region. Large concentrations of potash in the blood can cause water to be withdrawn from the peripheral circulation, including the skin to the central circulation such as blood vessels. This causes the heart to be over worked weakening it and it may cause a cardiac arrest and can sometimes lead to sudden death, arising from complications created by harmful tradition (Imam et al 2003). In the words of Fathalla “society has more of an obligation to prevent maternal deaths than to prevent death from diseases” (Fathalla 2004). Pregnancy and child-birth are a privileged function of women, essential for the survival of our species. Women have a right a basic human rights, to be protected when they undertake the risky business of pregnancy and child birth. This is in line with the general Islamic teachings as supported by the *Qur’an* where it is stated thus:

Let the women live (in ‘iddah) in the same style as ye live according to your means: annoy them not so

as to restrict them. And if they carry (life in their wombs) then spend (your substance) on them until they deliver their burden: and if they suckle your (offspring) give them their recompense: and take mutual counsel together according to what is just and reasonable. And if ye find yourselves in difficulties let another woman suckle (the child) on the (father's) behalf. Let the man of means spend according to his means: and the man whose resources are restricted let him spend according to what Allah has given him. Allah puts no burden on any person beyond what He has given him. After a difficulty Allah will soon grant relief. (Q 65:6-7).

In another chapter and verse Allah says:

The mothers shall give suckle to their offspring for two whole years, if the father desires to complete the terms. No soul shall have a burden laid on it greater than it can bear. No mother shall be treated unfairly on account of her child. Nor a father on account of his child (Q 2:233).

Thus Muslims have an obligation to eradicate these harmful practices that they hold on to sacredly, since the practices are not in keeping with Islamic teaching and constitute more hazard than good. Both the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* are against such obnoxious practices. The *Qur'an* says:

And strive hard in Allah's cause as you ought to strive. He (the Almighty) has chosen you (the Muslims) to convey this message of Islam to mankind and has not laid upon you in religion any hardship" (Q22:78). The prophet of Islam said: "Be kind to your women for they are a trust in your hands from Allah (Nawawi Hadith 1985).

2.3 Widowed Rites:

There is hardly any ethnic group in Nigeria, where a widow does not go through one dehumanizing condition or another. The difference lies in the gravity of the procedure which varies from one culture to another. Although Islam has drastically wiped away these harmful practices, there are still traces of them in the system in which the Muslims of this country (Nigeria) observe widowhood. In some areas of Northern Nigeria such as Bida, Kano, Katsina, a widow is allowed to plait her hair only once, twice or three times throughout the mourning period, depending on the area. She also bathes occasionally. She does not take her bath in the day time, she does not sweep her domain by herself (Zainab, Rakiya and Hajaratu 2013).

In addition, the widow is made to carry certain objects like a knife and wear things like talisman (*laya*) out of fear that the deceased husband may disturb her during her sleep. And, by the time she does that, she may not likely see him in her dream. In some communities of Kano state, a widow bathes once a week, she must not stretch her legs while she walks slowly and she must never be in a hurry. On the last day of her waiting period, (*iddah*), she must not sleep nor should her friends and neighbours who will visit her. She is expected to use ashes to cover her private part. All these measures are adopted to prevent her husband from visiting her after death (Talat 2014).

In the Ibo speaking part of the country, a group of the daughters of the kindred otherwise known as the "Umuada" subject the widow to all kinds of torture. Usually, the widow is directly accused of having killed her husband in order that she would inherit his estate. Her hair is then shaved clean with a sharp object (Akpala 1998). She is kept in a room covered in ash for several weeks. In some cases where death may have occurred in controversial circumstances she is forced to drink of the water used in washing the corpse of her deceased husband to prove that she has no hand in his death (Akpala 1998).

In addition, the widow and her children can be thrown out of their house without given them their share of inheritance (Nshi Simon 2014). These practices violate the widow's right to life, human dignity, security of person and freedom from torture. However, none of these measures has reference in Islamic law.

In Islam there are provisions for the rights of widows. The widow has the right to remain in her late husband's house. She is entitled to feeding, clothing and maintenance from the deceased's assets. Allah says:

Those of you who died and leave widows should bequeath for their widows a year's maintenance and residence but if they leave (the residence), there is no blame on you for what they do with themselves provided it is reasonable, and God is exalted in power, wise (Q2:240).

The concept of mourning by the widow (*Ihdad*) is well-defined. She abstains from anything that will make her attractive to any man. She does not use perfumes, rings, jewelries, beautiful dresses or a special kind of soap that add more to the beauty of a woman. She should not use any dress that indicates gorgeousness in her society (Ambali 1998). During the period of mourning, it is forbidden for a man to propose marriage to her. If she is pregnant, her mourning period lasts till delivery. The widow can go out and continue her business or work if any. Islam therefore discourages relegating the widow to any kind of inhuman condition such as leaving the hair unkempt and so on.

3. Effects of Harmful Practices on Women's Development

Some Muslim women in Nigeria are unaware of their Shari'ah rights. It is this state of ignorance which ensures their acceptance and consequently, the perpetuation of harmful cultural practices affecting their well-

being and that of their children. Harmful cultural practices are among the greatest obstacles to women's contribution to development of their society. This is reflected in the Nigeria women's growing impoverishment, inferior status in the family and society, and unequal access to legal rights, social welfare, education, poverty and political participation. Of course from the backbone of the larger society, which is the family, woman has her own potentials that manifest in the fabric of the nation for the better. Practices, such as harmful birth practices constitute health hazards to the woman to the extent of serious ailments in some cases. In addition, the low value accorded to the girl child by the society, makes her to have a very low esteem of herself with consequent effect on her performance in school and other activities which requires the use of intellect. Certainly, no meaningful development can be achieved under this condition. Therefore, community education is critical to increasing public awareness of the negative consequences of these practices and changing societal norms.

4. Conclusion

Attempt has been made to show case some harmful cultural practices affecting the girl child and women. These practices include among other things, Widowhood rites, Gishiri cut or Yakan Zur Zur (multiple cut in the wall of the vagina), Hymenectomy, etc. The Islamic view point is reflected in order to show that, these practices are not condoned by Islam. Lack of Islamic education among some Muslim women is a great impediment to their ability to uproot harmful cultural practices affecting them. Therefore Muslim women should endeavour to study and understand the correct interpretation of the Shari'ah (Islamic law) and continue to strive for its correct application especially on issues concerning them. It is important that the girl child and women acquire both the Islamic and secular education and should be given the opportunity to engage in various aspects of National development without going against the tenets of Islam. They should be provided with security, shelter, medical and social welfare. Thus, women's education is central to both women development and overall National development.

REFERENCES

- Ambali, M.A., *The Practice of Muslim Family Law in Nigeria*. Zaria, Nigeria: Tamaza Publishing Company Ltd. 1998, P163.
- Akpala, Ada, Sylvia. *Women's Rights are Human Rights*, Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd., 1998,p24.
- A.O. Omotasho (2007) "Islam, Custom, Culture and tradition: The Dilema of the Nigerian Muslims" in quarterly journal of studies and research in Islam, Bait al-Hikmah, Madinat-al-Hikmah, PP 69-70
- Fathalla F. Mahmoud *Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Wrongs. The case of maternal mortality as a reproductive wrong*. Chicago: Illinois. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, 2004.
- Imam M. Ayesha et al Research Report submitted to the Human Rights Violation Investigation Commission (Oputa panel) Nigeria. 2003.
- Mandara Mairo U. (1995) "Prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation in Zaria: A Critical Appraisal," in Grace Osakwe (ed), *Discussing Reproductive Rights in Nigeria*, IRRRAG-Nigeria, P31 – 32.
- Muslim B. Hajaj B. Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, (Translated into English by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi) Daral Arabia, Beirut, n o Vol.2 P712.
- Onuwa Chizoba,(2002) " Harmful traditional Practices WRAPA Newsletter, quarterly Bulleting vol. 3, No 1, January, P17.
- Ogbuani, Aniamaka, K. (2001) *What if women are in charge?*, Abuja: Purpose Book, Joyce Graphic Printers and Publishers Co., PP 48 – 55.
- Odebiyi, Sesay, A.(eds) (1998) *Nigerian Women's in Society and Development*, Ibadan: Dokun Publishing House., P8
- Sada Ibrahim Na'iyia (2005) "Promoting Women's Rights through Shari'ah in Nigeria" A report of the centre for Islamic Legal Studies Kaduna, p 13.
- Yarnap Hadasah, (1997), "The Sweat and Bitter Part of My Tradition," A Collection of Poems Highlighting the Harmful Traditional Practices that Affect the Health of Women and Children, p2.

List of Interviews

Name	Age	Occupation	Date
Talatu Baba	29	No w 367 Emiwokura Banwuya area, Bida House wife Nupe tribe	22/12/13
Zainab Alfa	55	House wife , Nupe tribe	24/12/13
Rakiya Musa	45	House wife, Nupe tribe of Bida Niger State	26/12/13
Hajara Wachiko	50	Housewife, Nupe tribe of Bida Niger State	28/12/13
Sa'adatu Naturunku	40	House wife Gwari from Kaduna State	30/12/13
Hajiya Saratu Yahaya	Adult	Retiree Yoruba indigene of Ibadan	01/01/14
Fatimah Attahiru	Adult	Lecturer Sokoto Polytechnic, Dept. of English Sokoto, Hausa tribe.	03/01/14
Zulfa Muhammad	Adult	House wife Yoruba indigene of Ogbomosho	05/01/14
Nshi Simon	Adult	Igbo indigene	07/01/14
Mairo	Adult	Director, Adolescent Health and information project Kano State, Hausa tribe	09/01/14
Lami	Adult	House wife, Hausa of Zamfara State	11/01/14

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:
<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

