

RELIGION & GENDER

Vol. 5, no. 1 (2015), 118-120 | DOI: 10.18352/rg.10103

Review of Margot Badran (ed.), *Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality and Law*, Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Stanford University Press 2011, ix + 324 pp., ISBN 978-0-8047-7481-9

BY AN VAN RAEMDONCK, GHENT UNIVERSITY, BELGIUM

Gender and Islam in Africa is an excellent collection of essays offering insight into major contemporary debates concerning the study of gender, family law and Islamic feminism in Africa. Badran chose to focus on the African continent in its entirety and rejects the fictional division of the continent. Instead, the book takes into account the cross-continental cultural and religious connections and exchange. The volume is interdisciplinary as it brings together the work of historians, linguists, anthropologists and scholars in the fields of area studies, gender and religion studies. All contributions are based on extensive research and fieldwork and demonstrate in-depth knowledge of regional and historical context, which is one of the book's main benefits. This makes *Gender and Islam in Africa* interesting for students of African studies, gender and religion studies and anthropology. The book generally addresses the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and thus captures the surge of both conservative political Islam and Islamic feminist reformism. The first section of the book focusses on female religious knowledge production, the second section discusses cultural and religious processes of gender construction and the final section concentrates on interactions between family law activism and the postcolonial state.

The first section of the book entitled 'Women Re/produce knowledge' discusses women's Islamic scholarship. Beverly B. Mack and Ousseina D. Alidou each offer a detailed social biography of a female Islamic sufi scholar in Nigeria and Niger respectively. Both contributions focus on the genesis of these two women's vocations and their role in shaping Islamic scholarship and education in their countries. Mack discusses the life of the nineteenth-century Muslim woman scholar, Nana Asma'u Fodiyo in West Africa whose work was founded on religious precepts of equality, which were accepted by the ruling male elite as inarguable in her time. Nana Asma'u's scholarly endeavours were not considered an exception, but were understood to reflect a history of women's involvement in the pursuit of knowledge and the formation of a common canon in

Islam. Mack points at the importance of orality and narration for any definition of scholarship in an Islamic context, and most particularly in the context of female scholarship. For the more recent period of post-independence Niger and especially since the democratisation process of the early 1990s, Ousseina D. Alidou argues that political pluralism also affected religious organisations and education. She places her study of the life of Islamic scholar Malama A'ishatu Dancandu in the wider framework of contemporary Sahelian Islamic 'cultural-cum-religious' women leaders (p. 42). Malama A'ishatu fought for women's and girl's education through the Islamic – Quranic – notion of the right to knowledge for all, being positioned in between patriarchal indigenous tradition and French colonialism.

Two other contributions in the first section, by Raja Rhouni and Sa'diyya Shaikh, actively engage with female Islamic theology. Raja Rhouni discusses the growing body of work that has been denoted as Islamic feminism, taking Fatima Mernissi's work and shifts in Mernissi's self-positioning as a central case study. Rhouni then personally engages with current theological debates about the goals and tasks of Islamic feminist work. She argues for an 'Islamic gender critique' which is 'open to non-Muslims and secular scholars alike, as well as to those who claim to be writing from a position of faith' (p. 78). She contends that an Islamic gender critique needs to expand and find a way out of the binary of 'interpretation and counter-interpretation' (p. 82). Her suggested answer lies in moving beyond the confines of the traditional methodology of ta'sil (derivation of laws from the Qur'an and sunna) within fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Sa'diyya Shaikh appears to agree with Rhouni as she proposes a new research methodology within Islamic feminist scholarship that she calls 'embodied tafsir', i.e. 'a Qur'anic hermeneutics that purposefully takes into consideration the lived experience of Muslim women when seeking to understand gender ethics in the Qur'an' (p. 92). Based on qualitative research with immigrant battered Muslim women in South Africa, she offers an analysis of these women's understandings and explicit grapplings with Islamic and Qur'anic ethics.

The second part of essays is organised around the theme of 'Re/constructing Women, Gender and Sexuality'. Lidwien Kapteijns analyzes popular Somali songs from the 1960s through the 1980s on their discourse about nationalism and nationalist moral womanhood. These songs were one of the most important sites where the national debate on how to be 'modern and yet moral' was taking place. Kapteijns demonstrates how 'popular songs legitimised these new social institutions of love match and companiate marriage by imbuing old cultural concepts with new meanings and applying them to new contexts (p. 126)'. In a much different illustration of reconstructing gender, Marloes Janson discusses the case of the islamist Tabligh Jama'at in Gambia. The reformist influence of the Tabligh Jama'at on young middle-class Gambian men and women with a modern and secular education causes deep societal changes and shifts in gender roles. Women's involvement in life-cycle rituals (such as naming ceremonies and weddings) has been reduced while Tablighi women gained other forms of public activity which are, however, strictly defined and circumscribed by male leaders.

The following two essays by Heike Behrend and Margot Badran share the common background of the introduction of shari'a law in several northern states of Nigeria. Behrend focusses on a Hausa remake of the Hollywood film Titanic as a platform to debate gender roles. She argues that 'with the rise

of fundamentalist Islam, divisions among women increased tremendously (pp. 182–183)'. The female protagonist in the Hausa remake represents a typical modern, independent woman. This became a highly disputed position for women as only marriage constituted the accepted norm and society polarised in the wake of the introduction of shari'a-backed criminal law. Badran places her analysis of Nigerian feminist activism within the wider picture of developing Nigerian and worldwide Islamic feminism. Nigerian activism was sparked after the accusation of two poor women of zina (adultery). Women activists debated 'how the male-defined (and/or 'state-defined') shari'a was constructed and deployed to the detriment of women and the poor' (p. 203). Ensuing Nigerian activism furthermore provides an interesting case of interreligious feminist cooperation, as both Muslim and Christian women were involved in support of the two women accused of zina.

Students of Islamic studies and sociology of law may be particularly interested in the last section of this volume. The third and last section looks at 'shari'a, family law and activism' against a backdrop of political liberalisation and democratisation. Corinne Fortier discusses the practice of secret marriage in several Islamic countries with a special focus on the case of Moorish society in Mauritania. Secondly, the reformation process of Moroccan family law, the Mudawanna, is recounted by Julie E. Pruzan-Jørgensen against the background of autocracy and political liberalisation. Moroccan civil society has seen a remarkable degree of growth and activation during the years of family law reform. But ultimately, the sovereign decided solely over family law reform that nevertheless pleased both secular women's rights activists and islamist women groups.

Malian and South-Africa family law debates are outlined by Benjamin F. Soares and Rashida Manjoo respectively. This section details national debates on postcolonial civil codes, religious law and pluralistic legal practices. Soares addresses the shifting boundaries between 'custom', 'fiqh' (Islamic jurisprudence) and actual social practices. Since the colonial period, the categories of 'custom' and 'fiqh' have often been collapsed together, while at the same, paradoxically, knowledge about religion and Islamic Maliki jurisprudence increased and continues to spread among large groups in society.

The book succeeds in offering in-depth discussions at the intersection of gender ideologies, Islamic family law and the postcolonial state in a wide range of African countries. It offers innovative scholarship on women and religion and original contributions in Islamic feminist theology. *Gender and Islam in Africa* might appeal to a broad range of readers and to more specialised students of Islamic law, gender and anthropology in Africa.