

The Role of Muslim Women in Moorish Empire Implications for Women in Islam Today

By

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Introduction

"The results of Mohammed have been greatly underestimated. In the century after Mohammed's death it wrestled Asia Minor, Africa, and Spain from Christianity, more than half of the civilised world, and established a civilisation, the highest in the world during the Dark Ages. It brought the Arabian race to their highest development, raised the position of women in the East, though it retained polygamy, was intensively monotheistic, and until the Turks gained control, for the most part encouraged progress."¹

The flourishing Moorish Empire of Northwest Africa and Spain, called the "Empire of the Two Shores"; was a culture in harmony with Shariah, and on a practical level they represented an ideal Muslim society. The artistic excellence, brilliant literary output, invention in architecturing of an egalitarian social, political and economic system, the high respect and position of women, the revival of mysticism and ancient philosophy were all evidence of the practical application of Shariah, where both the inner and outer dimensions of culture are in harmony. This balance or harmony pervades every facet of culture: the arts, the sciences, education, social equality, ethics, mythology and ritual.²

The purpose of this paper is to show that as far back as the Moorish empire, African women enjoyed a freedom and respect that women now only dream about. As a matter of fact, their literary output, prominence in sculpture, painting, crafts, philosophy, theology, medicine, administration, displayed a far greater freedom, independence, and eminence than other women of the world at that time. Strictly speaking, no woman in the

historical period of Aha to Muhammad attained the level of activity, equanimity and esteem as the African Muslim woman of the Moorish Empire.

The Legacy of Muhammad

To understand fully the reason for the high position and status of women in the Moorish Empire, it is necessary to go back to the period Muhammad first received the revelation of the Quran and made major changes in the decadent social and political systems that had stagnated Arabia and many other parts of the world. The Quran as well as the teaching and life-style of Muhammad account for the progressive development.

In the first place, the Quranic emphasis on Unity, Brotherhood, liberation from oppression and ignorance, equality, the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom for both men and women, brought on a revolution in the treatment and status of women of Saudi Arabia and the African Muslim world.

Second, Muhammad as the great paragon of the ideal Islamic personality left a legacy of exemplary activity in his *Sunnah* (Way of life). He was a loving husband and father, kind and gentle to his wives, daughters, friends, and the women who came to him. He showed a fatherly affection to all women even those who hated and abused him.³ At home Muhammad assisted his wives with their household chores - cooking, sewing and cleaning -, and took a keen interest in their vocations, hobbies, characters and thinking. Though he contracted marriage with several women later in his life, he was a devoted monogamist for over a quarter of a century with his first wife, Khadija.

The prophet, Muhammad, had the utmost love and reverence for women and has left a plethora of sayings extolling their rights and virtues. When asked by one of his companions what were the things he loved most in this world, he replied: "Prayer, women and perfume."⁴ He loved women most in this world and consummated that love in the radical changes he made in the status of women, guaranteeing their divine rights as equal, independently thinking

human beings and extolling their virtues and their importance to culture. When Muhammad was asked who was most deserving of kindness and respect in this life, he replied, "your mother, and then your father." The mother is to be shown three times more kindness and respect than the father. They receive as the mother of the nation. From them culture blooms and finds its sustenance". The Prophet also used to say: "paradise lies at the foot of the mother". An even greater value was assigned to the woman of virtue. "The world and all things in it are valuable, but the most valuable thing in the world is a virtuous woman."⁵

From all surviving accounts, Muhammad had a spiritually deep and loving relationship with his wife Khadija, and in no instance do we find a male dominance of the household in the prophet's *sunnah*. Muhammad and the men of the *Sahaba* were "servants of their homes," helping the women with household chores, caring for children, educating their daughters, taking them from the infanticidal sands to the highest thrones of respect and honours, and fighting side by side with them in war.⁶ Indeed Muhammad's regard and respect for women is seen in the famous saying to his followers:

He is most perfect in Islam whose disposition is best; and the best of you are they who behave best to your wives.⁷

Equality for Women

The Moorish model was a fulfilment of the Islamic ideal of equality for women. Women during this era held high ranking positions and professions along with the men. It is interesting to note that in the great days of Mohammedan Spain, Arabian women were not confined, as in the East to harems, but appeared freely in public and took their full share in all the intellectual, literary and even scientific movements of the day. Women held schools in some of the principal towns. There were women poets, historians and philosophers as well as women surgeons and doctors.⁸

Indeed during the Prophet's time women were encouraged to study, learn and "seek knowledge even if they had to go to China." Women in *Jahalliya* (days of ignorance) Arabia, who were owned like property, now became the rightful heirs of their own property, and while the man is enjoined to provide for the woman and children, the woman has right to spend her money as she pleases. Radical changes were made in the economic system once women were given control of the nation's surplus wealth. Much of this wealth was spent for social causes, the building of schools, mosques, universities, libraries, museums, hospitals, the kinds of charitable institutions women (given the opportunity) have supported throughout history. In the same vein, forced marriages, circumcision, quick divorces, the burial of new-born daughters, the buying and selling of women were abolished in Islam.⁹ Furthermore, with monotheistic fervour, women were enjoined not to submit to men but to God alone, for men too can become evil gods to them. Men and women were therefore *awalliya*, "guardians and protecting friends of each other," a *yin-yang* complement in thinking, counsel, advice, values and activity.

Muhammad taught women that they were the creators of civilisation. Thus in their marriage with the cosmogenic roots in Islam, African Muslim women became an enlightened, liberated group who made a substantial contribution to the development of Moorish civilisation. It should be observed that the hard core patriarchy generally associated with Muslim society was absent here. Men and women mingled freely in public and private and extra-marital friendships with members of the opposite sex was encouraged.¹⁰ Though it was probably not matriarchal society in the fullest sense, what we find instead is a matriarchal-patriarchal balance stemming from the idealisation of romantic lives that had its rebirth and importation to the West from Moorish culture. The realisation of ideal love was a favourite theme of Moorish novelists, poets, painters, troubadours, and the allegorization of women as the object of divine union became the most widely used metaphor in Sufi poetry.¹¹ What we have in the Moorish example is a revolution in male-female relationship based on an emotional

and spiritual bonding of mutual love, understanding, and compassion. These kinds of relationships seem to mitigate either a patriarchal or matriarchal dominance, for the fact that they have achieved a union in their own relationship that neutralises duality. As metaphysicians say: the energy emitted from the union of opposites is love. Still there were many features of Moorish culture that were matriarchal in character and direction. For example, the prevailing icon and religious sculpture of the Black Madonna and child, the symbol of the *Kaaba* and black mother; dynasties with matrilineal descent;¹² women as pioneers of education, taking part in every profession, every science, every art; women as great mystics and healers and arising like an ancient goddess as a symbol of the Divine Being in popular literature. Though the female did not dominate the male, neither did she acquiesce to him.

Matriarchal societies, now buried under the bigoted sands of prehistory, nevertheless, did exist. Mythologies, ancient legends, hymns, iconography all attest to the existence of a matriarchal order that preceded the patriarchal; and one of the most obvious remnants of that time is the matrilineal lines of royal descent found universally in African societies, and which Diop delineated in his *Two Cradle Theory* as a major component of African cultural continuity.¹³

Isis, the symbol of the quintessential Black woman, is described in numerous myths, tales and hymns as the one who taught the arts, mathematics, alchemy, astronomy, medicine, writing, weaving, ceramic, and laid out the social judiciary laws governing human relations.¹⁴ More importantly, there is a constellation of historical antecedents in the relatively high status of women in the Nile Valley civilisation, and later, North and West Africa.

The *Kaaba* itself appears to symbolise both civilisation and the Black woman; it is the burial shrine of an Ethiopian woman under whose skirt civilisation was born. The word *Kaaba* is a compound of two complementary aspects of the soul whose dimensions form the base of the pyramid. In ancient Mexico, the black chabbah stones symbolised the sacred authority bestowed on the

Quezacatl's who were the messengers of cultural innovation and civilisation.¹⁵

The Muslim pilgrimage or Hajj, named after Hajjar, is a ritual re-enacting the peregrinations of Hajjar while she attempts to save the life of her sick son, Ishmael. The circumambulation of the *Kaaba*,¹⁶ the most crucial part of the Hajj ceremony, is the ritual calling up of her spirit, a spirit of civilisation, faith, learning, enlightenment. The fact that the most important ceremonial ritual in Islam is an invocation to the civilising spirit of an enlightened Ethiopian woman seems to suggest that her presence must be fully known in the world for its order, harmony, and preservation. For she is *Ma*, the first creation, Goddess of Harmony, Justice, Truth. She is Isis, the etheric life substance from which all things are moulded. Whatever her state of mind or consciousness, this is reflected in the consciousness of her people. Therefore, the Native Americans would say, "When the woman is sick, the society is sick." And that "man is the striking arm of woman." Man carries out the instructions of her mental blueprints. Once those blue prints mirror the reality of the cosmic world, the humanist vision of peace can be realised. To this end the Islamic symbols and rituals were designed, and the spiritual forces of progress have been turning its wheel in this direction ever since the fall of woman.

Reversals

The Muslim conquest of North Africa, like the Muslim conquest of Spain, was for all intents and purposes, a revolution. The white christian hegemony was broken, lands were confiscated and redistributed to the poor, equitable social and judicial laws were enacted, and autonomy was restored to the indigenous population.¹⁷ As earlier observed, Muhammad in particular was very much concerned about the rights and dignity of women. Thus the Prophet would proclaim:

"The rights of women are sacred. See that women are maintained in rights assigned to them."¹⁸

It is surprising, however, that the early Muslim civilisation of Africa and Asia suffered untold reversals. In fact, considering the common opinion that the Muslim religion is oppressive to women, the questions are raised: What did just happen to these sacred rights? What or who changed the liberating tide of Islam to one of oppression? When did all this occur?

One thing is clear. At the early stages of each religious revolt women are liberated and given equal status with men until the cyclical backlash of barbarianism and male dominance takes over, erasing and interpolating sacred texts, reversing myths, icons, and maxims to justify male dominance. The revolution in Buddhism, Christianity and Islam was short-circuited by the intrusion of bad ideas from the barbarians, stealing the treasures, the banning of women from public meetings, from receiving an education, or from making rightful claims to their property. The restrictions of women in Islam made an opposite turn from the initial revelation, and the pitiable oppression of women in Islam today is the result.¹⁹ Kaukah Siddique explicitly names the influence of the Ottoman Turks as what changed the liberation tide of Islam to one of oppression. He states:

If a date has to be place on the finalization of the secondary status given to women in Muslim lands, I am inclined to use 1258 C.C, the year in which Halaqu Khan plundered Baghdad and set fire to the stores of knowledge accumulated through centuries of scholarship.²⁰

Implications

The rights and activities of women in Islam during the Moorish Empire arguably has far reaching implications both for women and Islam in contemporary times. For one, from Isis to Nitocris, Hatshepsut, Tiye, Nefertitti, Queen Makeda, Cleopatra VII, the

Kentake Queens of Cush, to Queen Nzinga, Amina, Sarrounia, Yaasantewa, Nehanda, on across the waters to Nana Achaampong, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary McCleod Bethune, Black women can draw on an inexhaustible source of inspiration and intelligence from the blood and memories of their foremothers. Indeed, when the fruits of such female geniuses are reaped on a large scale as it was in Africa and Spain, new civilisations are born out of the knowledge of the old. Moorish women, true to their ancestral paragons, ardently took the reins of nation building in their hands like the two African women who founded the first Islamic University at Kairowan, laying out the rudiments of the same university system used today: the Sufi mystical schools of the renowned mystic-saint, Fatima, who were the secret of the great saints of Spain; or Queen Zaynab Al-Natzawiya of the Almoravid Dynasty, who was the driving force behind the Almoravid conquest of the Two Empires; or the famed singer and poet Zumar.²¹

Indeed at the dawning of civilisation it was the woman who pulled off the covers of darkness with the rising sun of female creative intuition - the ability to dream a world into being. The essence and roots of culture were symbolically linked to the woman's womb, the first source of cultural development. Women are the wellspring from which culture springs; they are culture-bearers. Hence they are the measuring rod of cultural progress, as Nkrumah and Malcom-X both were to notice. The progressive energy of a nation, according to them, was directly related to the position of its women. DuBois had written earlier, that the "progress of the Negro race depended on the dignity and intelligence of Black women." Thus African Muslim women today **must** somehow resurrect from the ashes of oppression and take **their destiny** in their hands. Herein lies the challenge of the African woman. She must relink the *Ka* to the *Ba*, reclaim the crown of **high culture and civilisation**, and make revolution a reality.

Conclusion

From all that has been discussed above, it is obvious that the position and status of women in Islam during the Moorish period was equal to none contrary to the current restriction and oppression of women found in Muslim societies. It is sad that judging by the present condition of Muslim women, the woman has a long way to walk to freedom. That the African Muslim woman today has consented to the betrayal of selfhood is perhaps the most tragic aspect of this oppression, for it is largely self-inflicted by its admission to inferiority and compliance to a status contradictory to human nature. It is important, however, that women in Islam should take their place in history like soldiers of the night and be the protectors of their nations again. Indeed the women should realise that the most valuable thing in the world is a virtuous woman. Her virtue being the nation's virtue; her wholeness, health and intelligence, the nation's wholeness, health and intelligence; her wealth, the nation's wealth. Above all, it should be known that the oppression of women is antithetical to the teachings of Islam.

¹ Manley P Hall, *Secret Teaching of All Ages*. Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society, 1977 p. 49

² Stanley Lane Poole, *The Moors of Spain*, Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1990 pp. vii - ix

³ There is a story of the Prophet, who during the early days of his prophethood used to pass everyday by a woman's house on the way home. The woman was an opponent of his new teaching and showed her scorn by throwing her slop water on him each day while he passed her house. One day the woman did not come out, and the prophet, sensing she was sick, went to see about her. After the visit she realised Muhammad was a Prophet and became a Muslim.

⁴ Hakim Moinddin Chisti, *The Book of Sufi Healing*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, Inc., p. 111.

⁵ Al Mamum Al-Suhrawardy, *The Sayings of Muhammad*. New York: Carol Pub. Co., 1990 pp. 97, 111

⁶ Kaukab Siddique, *The Liberation of Women Through Islam*. Kingsville, MD: American Society for Education and Religion, 1990, pp. 60 - 63

⁷ Al-Suhrawardy, *op. cit.*, p. 116

⁸ Lady Lugard, *Tropical Dependency*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1905, p. 49

⁹ Siddique, *op. cit.*, pp. 3 - 4, 71

¹⁰ In Leo Africannus. *History of Africa III*. New York: Burt Franklin Pub. p. 427, he describes the mingling of men and women at the public baths. "Here men and after they have done bathing use to banquet and make merry with pleasant music and singing". There is another instance where Ibn Battuta visits a Saharan Town and notices that the wife of his Almoravid host is talking. He questions his host about who the visitor is he replied, "that is my wife's friend. And you allow her to sit in bed with another man in your presence?" Battuta was amazed and appalled by his liberality. "There is nothing wrong in it. We consider it an honour. Our women are not like yours". See *Travels of Ibn Battuta IV*, Millwood, N.Y., Kraus Reprint, Hakiuyt Society, 1971

¹¹ The novels, poetry and treatises of Moorish civilisation were overflowing with the idea of love, divine, moral human or profane. It was the favourite subject of the poet, novelist, the storyteller, the mystic. The use of woman as metaphor and allegory of divine union reached its peak in the Sufi poetry of Moorish Spain. The custom of serenading their beloved under the moonlight, chivalry, romance, knighthood, were all borrowed from Moorish culture. What was idealised in Europe as *romantic love*, was realised by the Moors. Yet, more than romantic it was an intimate spiritually refining relationship, more of the tantric order, where the partner is contemplated as an epiphany of the Divine Being. See Henry Corbin, *The Creative Imagination of Ibn Arabi*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969

¹² Norris, T H, *Saharan Myths And Legends*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 39

¹³ Cheikh Anta Diop. *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, Chicago: Third World Press, 1978, pp. 27 - 37

¹⁴ Daryl Ford, *Cleopatra*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972

¹⁵ Ivan Van Sertina, *They Came Before Columbus*. New York: Random House, 1976 p. 75

¹⁶ Kaaba or caaba is the small, nearly cubical stone building in the court of the Great Mosque at Mecca, which contains the sacred black rock, thought by Muslims to have been given by Gabriel to Abraham. It is the object of annual pilgrimage, and worship centre to which Moslems turn in daily prayer.

¹⁷ Poole, *op. cit.*, pp. 43 - 44

¹⁸ Al - Suhrawardy, *op. cit.* p 118

¹⁹ Kaukah Siddique, *The Struggle of Muslim Women*. Kingsville MD: American Society for Education and Religion, 1983, p 48

²⁰ Siddique, *op. cit.*, pp. 54 - 55

²¹ Poole, *op. cit.*, p. 105