

Olga Śnieżko

University of Gdansk

Men and women in Islam: between the stereotype and the reality in Northern Sudan

This text explores the culture of Northern Sudan from the point of view of gender-related problems, which are very clearly determined by the religion dominating in the region. Northern Sudan is an area of my broad empirical research concerning the impact (i.e. the crossing, abrogating, and strengthening) of religion and tradition on the local gender politics of the body, health, and sexuality, as well as the related practices (in particular the practice of female circumcision). In this article, I shall only relate to a small scope of my explorations concerning the impact of religion on the concept of femininity and masculinity. Intentionally, it will not be an “unmasking” interpretation aimed at showing the distance between the local culture permeated with religious elements and the Western culture, and identifying, naming, and condemning its shortcomings. It is, rather, an attempt at an interpretation that is naive, accepting and does not question cultural categories significant for the culture of Northern Sudan. However, I have not managed to entirely avoid references to the Western attitude. This article will present both theoretical reconstructions, and fragments of narrations – the first interviews I conducted with women from Sudan in the summer of 2014.

Culture and religion of Islam

The beginnings of the culture of Islam date back to the 7th century AD. At the same time, the religion of Muhammad – Islam – was also born. Just like the civilizational culture of Islam, the religion is uniquely varied and dynamic. At the base of the culture of Islam lies an imposed religious affiliation. In the history of Islam, the culture is believed to be victorious with the built-in manifestation of its superiority over the defeated (Meier 1998, pp. 9–15).

Initially, Islam was perceived as revolutionary – an equal significance of men and women in the economy and society was highlighted, which was also reflected in the religion. In the historical period referred to as matriarchy, women had a so-

cial and political advantage over men. Indeed, women had the greatest power in society. The visions of femininity were connected with beauty, knowledge, desire, fertility, and love. One of the main assumptions behind patriarchy – the historical epoch that followed matriarchy – was the domination of men. Man symbolised reason, wisdom, knowledge, fertility, majesty, and law (Krzak 2007, pp. 11–21).

From Europeans, contact with the religious tradition of Islam requires exceptional tolerance, in particular intellectual. The notion of tradition largely lies at the gist of every religion. What is more, in the Muslim society tradition is hugely valued for its continuity; it is handed down from generation to generation. It is also worth pointing out that tradition gives sense to the symbolic values cultivated by the followers of this religion. Although the religious tradition of Islam does not enrich the everyday modernity of Muslims, it sets the social order, providing the “permanent ground necessary for all change” (Trzaskowski 2011, p. 73).

What has special significance in the Muslim tradition is *sunnah*. This notion is understood as the “custom of ancestors”. What is more, *sunnah* was perceived as the “tradition inherited from previous generations, covering the accepted, but also the neutral and the condemned” (Abdallah 2009, p. 20). *Sunnah* is one of the sources of the Muslim law. It is also worth pointing out that in the ethical sense, *sunnah* dictates ways of conduct in the daily life of its followers.

In the Arab-Muslim societies, the cultural discourse concerning the situation of women and men should not be understood as a clear-cut one. However, in the opinion of the West, the approach to the issues of gender equality and the fair division of women and men’s social roles is stereotypical in the countries in which Islam is the state religion, and today the attitude of the West is also extremely filled with fear of Islamic terrorism, religious radicalism, and generally by the sense of “war” between the civilization of Islam and the civilization of the West.

The roles of men and women in the society of Sudan are closely determined by religion and the system of law called Sharia. One of its main assumptions is the control of all aspects of the Muslim’s life. It is, however, worth pointing out that the social behaviour of men and women in some situations is marked by a large dose of freedom – for example in Sudanese society, the majority of women do not cover their hair in public places, although faithfulness to the precepts of religion would dictate otherwise.

The woman in Muslim society

Since the times of Jahiliyyah, there have been positive changes to the life of women. It is believed that the treatment of women changed from being objectified to being subjectified. Along with the coming of Islam, a new woman emerged – the free woman of Islam. Since that moment we may officially refer to the Muslim woman who has acquired the possibility to learn – to deepen and improve her knowledge. Islam granted women the right to possess property that is respected and can be kept in the case of a divorce. In comparison with the period of jahiliyyah, the current situ-

ation of women has been entirely revolutionised and is tantamount to a great step forward towards liberation from the continuous pressure of the Arab customs and traditions. As an individual, the woman acquired equal status with the man.

Islam also let women shape their own individual personalities, and it became a road to liberation – to becoming free from the burdening stereotypes that accompanied them in their daily lives before. Owing to the religion of Islam, Muslim women acquired a high social position, in particular in the fulfilment of their basic roles of daughters, mothers, and individuals active in the particular areas of social life. Since then women became equal to men in broadly understood social, economic, and political rights. Islam destroyed the heretofore existing sense of injustice and oppression in relation to women in the social sphere (Abu-Rub Zabza 2008, p. 6).

Equal status of women and men, and women's rights, allowed women to become enlightened Muslims able to look at themselves in a different, more positive, light.

Today, Muslim women usually successfully combine the roles of wives and mothers with their professional duties, just like women in Europe. We also need to point out that our cultures and religions are different – they are based on different values. In the Arab society, religion fulfils the superior function. It is the mechanism controlling the entire life of the Muslim society. Women in Islam have real influence on their lives and the lives of their families; men consider their wives opinions.

In contrast to the period of jahiliyyah, when women had no rights and were treated as objects, Islam covered women with care and respect. In the opinion of the West, this religion enslaves and limits women by imposing on them the obligation to cover themselves and thus limiting their human rights, which – in the local understanding – is not entirely true. The Quran does not contain any information confirming the issue. It provides that women may cover themselves if they want to. What is a fact is that a Muslim woman out of her own free will reserves her beauty, if we understand beauty as the naked body, solely to her husband.

The man in the Muslim society

The role the man plays in the Muslim society is much different to the role played by the woman, although men and women have the same religious duties.

Depending on the relations with the people in his surroundings, the man undertakes a variety of social roles. Islam as a legal, religious, and cultural system determines the rights and obligations of the man referred to as (www.eioba.pl/a/23t/mezczyzni-i-kobiety-w-islamie):

1. grandfather;
2. uncle;
3. father;
4. brother;
5. son;
6. husband;

7. nephew;
8. man who is not a relative.

In view of masculine thoughtfulness and the wisdom of men's minds, men are not only able, but also obliged to care for women, who are physically weaker and are perceived as emotional (Machut-Mendecka 2008, pp. 24–25). Men are vested with the obligation to provide for their families.

Conception of sexual life in Islam

As far as the image of the body is concerned, men and women should cover their *'awrah*, i.e. the areas of their bodies which should not be visible to others. The man's *'awrah* spreads between his navel and knees, while the woman's *'awrah* covers her entire body with the exception of the face and palms. If a man and a woman are a married couple, then they do not have to cover their *'awrah* in each other's presence.

[...] Female sexual organs are associated with a hidden aspect of divinity [...] hence, female sexuality is reserved solely for the husband. Male sexuality on the other hand is reserved solely for the wife. [...] according to Islam, a Muslim using his sexuality in the legal way shall be rewarded [...]. Islam encourages men and women to enter into marriage, since it is marriage that Allah made the only [...] way, through which Muslims may satisfy their sexual desire. [...] Maintaining the continuity of the human race through procreation [...]. In Islam, the question of sex is not a problem. This religion also placed [...] certain barriers to the sexual drive – not to stop its development, but to stimulate and control its direction. Islam perceives the human sexual drive as people's natural need that must be satisfied rather than suppressed [...] The condition however is to satisfy it in a legal manner. (Bazsak 2003, 13.10.2014, pp. 35–38; Alsheha 13.10.2014).

One of the main aspects of femininity is sexuality – femininity in the aspect of sexuality is reserved solely for the husband. Sexuality is an indispensable and special asset of femininity, but it is not meant for show. The sexuality of Muslim women is wrapped in mystery, and hidden from “aliens”.

Stereotypical manners of presenting men and women. The reality of Northern Sudan

Islam respects women and guarantees equal rights to them

At present, there is a lot of debate on the status of women in Islam in the Western discourse. The topic is discussed in connection with attempts at adjusting the Muslim culture to the Western culture (or, more precisely, at showing its fundamental maladjustment). What is noteworthy, women's rights and obligations in Islam differ from the universal, globally-recognised human rights.

As our discussion concerning the stereotypical presentation of Muslim women unfolds, we may turn particular attention to the image created by the media. We seem to think of Muslim women as individuals who are backward, veiled and clothed in dark robes. What is more, when talking about women in Islam, we focus on the lack of esteem, the limitation of rights and the general absence of respect on the part of men. Is this picture of a Muslim woman true? What are the grounds behind such judgements and opinions?

In the religious-cultural tradition of Islam, women's status is equal with men's status. What is more, women are covered by respect and care. The interviewed women said for example:

Allah gave women their rights through al-Quran [...] (interview 2).

Owing to Islam, women acquired the rights they did not have previously: the right to decide, to marry, to inherit, to keep their dowries, to divorce, to decide about family matters (interview 3).

Islam perceives women, both non-married and married ones, as persons with their own rights, such as the right to own and make independent use of possessions and earnings without supervision (of the father, husband, or anyone else). They have the right to buy, sell, give gifts and alms, and may spend their money on whatever they want [...] (interview 4).

Muslim women – beauty hidden under the hijab

Opinions of the West concerning the functioning of Muslim women in the public sphere are shaped on the basis of stereotypes closely related to their clothing. The veiled woman is typically seen as "unlettered" and uneducated, and her life is perceived as limited solely to the home sphere.

However, as results from my interviews with women subjects, the veiled woman perceives herself through her faith, which determines her. The hijab, jilbab or niqab are garments marked by strong religious meaning, which shows to the world a woman who is modest, kind-hearted, and full of respect for her own dignity. By hiding her femininity under the specific clothing, she directs other people's attention to the beauty of her heart.

Women of the Near East, when wearing the hijab, jilbab, or niqab, protect themselves against inappropriate treatment, in particular by men. The benefits of the Muslim clothing worn by women are related to the protection of the female *'awrah* covering their entire bodies, respect for her, and, surprisingly to us, her freedom. The freedom of the woman wearing the hijab is expressed through the clothing, which, for her, provides an opportunity to manifest and seek her rights in the modern world. The Muslim woman wearing her clothes shows the strength of her faith. The religious meaning of the Muslim attire is stressed by the fact that it is worn by women. A Muslim woman's faith, if it comes from her heart, is true and is connected with happiness; it determines her identity, choice, and will.

Muslim women are perceived only and solely as ladies of the house and guardians of the hearth. However, from the religious point of view, the woman is created to be a mother and wife, and these are not her only roles determined by the Muslim society. The Muslim woman should be socially active, she should be active in various social organisations, and in the area of politics.

Covering hair is not related to an impossibility to participate in public life. This is evidenced by women who are active in the field of politics or in various political or social organisations. A woman who decides to wear the veil encounters no barriers to be active in the society (interview 3).

Clothing is to hide the woman and her beauty from the public sight; it may not highlight her beauty. Muslim women hide their hair, as it is no doubt a part of every woman's beauty. These limitations protect the woman's honour in the public place, directing people's attention to her personality traits rather than her beauty... (interview 4).

I wear hijab, but this is not related in any way to the concept of the public sphere or civic life. I put on the hijab out of a certain internal need based on my faith in Islam and this is probably so for every Muslim woman who wears it. (interview 5).

We, people of the West, typically create ungrounded stereotypes concerning women dressed in the black abayat. We perceive this clothing as a crucial evidence of enslavement; our beliefs on the situation of Muslim women are developed on the basis of the way they dress. The external, generally very superficial interpretation of the situation of women dressed in a non-European manner is limited, and we do not take into account all the aspects, all the issues which "speak through" this clothing. The cover does not prevent Muslim women from being educated, enlightened, and aware of their rights and possibilities.

Man as husband and father or archetypal warrior

We all know that the Muslim society is patriarchal. In theory, the man is considered a potential ruler. The man must ensure material prosperity for his family. He is also to look after the ethical/moral side of his marriage. He is ascribed the role of the archetypal warrior as a highly oppressive model of masculinity. In the Muslim society, the man plays the roles of a father, friend, strength, and provider for the woman. Man's culture is expressed through the provision of care and material security to the woman, and through looking after her.

Obviously, in every country in which Islam is the state religion, the situation is different and largely culture-determined.

The women's and the men's spaces are clearly separated from each other – this is a foundation of Muslim societies. Men draw advantages from the external world, and women rule the internal world. It is also worth pointing out that what is particularly clearly visible in the categories of "femininity" and "masculinity" is the traits highlighting gender, such as "anatomy, personality attributes, division of duties and social roles of men and women" (Grochola-Szczepanek 2009, p. 41).

Stereotypes are an unavoidable element of daily life. Without any doubt, the stereotypes result from the different culture in which Europeans are brought up. What is more, some individuals associate people from the African continent – in view of their skin colour and cultural differences – with inferiority and stupidity. This stereotype has a long history going back to colonial times (Kusio 2011, p. 23). As far as the use of stereotypes is concerned, we focus all our attention on the awareness of the fact and the cognitive limitations they carry. One of the main problems of the reality in which stereotypes are present is the fact that they always affect the cognitive structure of the society. More than that, the unconscious use of stereotypes and their consequences in social life lead to their uncritical acceptance. The perspective of the multidimensional functioning of men broadens the horizons, but also unavoidably leads to the emergence of conflicts (Kleina 2011, pp. 199–205).

In the tradition of the Arab-Muslim world, men and women function in separate, alien and non-familiarised worlds. It is worth pointing out that these worlds permeate each other, but just like for men, being themselves for women is possible only in the company of persons of their own gender; in other words, a woman can only be herself among women, and a man can only be himself among men.

In the Arab society, the situation of women changes very slowly and insignificantly. In the majority of societies, it is still dictated by tradition. The idea of gender is mainly shaped under the influence of the Arab culture and religion. In the Arab society, gender is understood in the categories of the opposition of better and worse. As a result, the woman is perceived in relation to the man as an individual who is subordinate and dependent. As aforementioned, in the Arab world, space is divided into that for men and that for women. The division accentuates the strict separation of duties between men and women. Today, we can observe certain changes, such as the ones taking place in the Sudanese society, where an increasing number of women are active in the public space previously culturally reserved solely for men.

In the Arab-Muslim society, the world is divided into the external one, in which men function, and the internal one, which is meant for women. Important family events in the Arab-Muslim tradition are yet another aspect determining separate space in the functioning of both sexes. The existence of a relation between the external and the internal areas is marked in the case of ritualised events related to celebrations: for example during a wedding party, when men and women share a space, enjoying themselves together. Likewise, under funeral-related customs in Sudan, women and men jointly remain awake for the watch over their dead ones, reciting verses from the Quran.

Conclusion

A contact with a different culture, even if we have a certain scope of knowledge about it, is related to an experience of a culture shock. With its 30 million km², Africa is one of the largest continents. The dissimilarity of the histories of Africa

and Europe is mainly the effect of differences between the two continents (Kusio 2011, p. 23). It should also be underlined that in Northern Sudan, and in particular in its capital city, Khartoum, Islam is the majority religion. Generally speaking, the languages which predominate in this area are Arabic and English. The most important issue in the manner in which notions to do with “femininity” and “masculinity” are created is a “set of traits and behaviours connected with gender, which are consistent with the stereotypes prevailing in a given culture” (Grochola-Szczepanek 2009, p. 41).

The picture of men and women in Islam is shaped on the basis of values other than European ones. It should be stressed that the perception of Muslim women as individuals without their own opinions, at the mercy of men, does not reflect the reality of Northern Sudan. In the cultural tradition of Islam, men and women are ascribed different duties, partially justified by biological differences: thus, the main tasks of the man include the obligation to provide for the home, while childcare is the woman’s obligation. In recent years, women increasingly have undertaken work, and are socially and politically active, winning financial independence.

In Islam, relationships between women and men are shaped on the basis of values which are much different to European ones. It is true that for persons brought up in a different culture, some kinds of behaviour may be surprising or may raise concern. However, on the other hand, in contrast to the prevailing opinions and media reports, it is possible to observe respect in relation to women.

The Near East and the North and South of Africa are areas considered the least stable ones in today’s world. What is more, they are also areas of the greatest unrest and conflicts, a part of which is the cultural and religious gender politics.

Literature

- Abdallah B., 2009, *Rola tradycji muzułmańskiej w egzegezie Koranu* [The Role of Muslim Tradition in the Quran Exegesis], [in:] J. Adamowski, J. Styk (eds.), *Tradycja dla współczesności. Ciągłość i zmiana. Tradycja w tekstach kultury* [Tradition for Contemporaneity. Continuity and Change. Tradition in Cultural Texts], vol. 2, Lublin.
- Abu-Rub H., Zabza B., 2008, *Status kobiety w islamie* [Status of the Woman in Islam], Katowice.
- Alsheha A., *Islam a seks* [Islam and Sex], peb.pl, Białystok, Poland [accessed on 13.10.2014].
- Baszak E., 2003, *Współżycie seksualne w kulturze islamu* [Sexual Intercourse in the Culture of Islam], “Seksuologia Polska”, nr 1.
- Grochola-Szczepanek H., 2009, *Kobiecość i męskość w tradycji i kulturze współczesnej Spisza* [Femininity and Masculinity in the Contemporary Tradition and Culture of Spisz], [in:] Adamowski J., Styk J. (eds.), *Tradycja dla współczesności. Ciągłość i zmiana. Tradycja w tekstach kultury* [Tradition for Contemporaneity. Continuity and Change. Tradition in Cultural Texts], vol. 2, Lublin.
- Kleina A., 2011, *Uczenie się międzykulturowe jako szansa na przełamywanie stereotypów narodowych* [Intercultural Learning as a Chance for Breaking National Stereotypes], [in:] A. Szerląg (ed.), *Konflikt i dialog w wybranych społecznościach wielokulturowych* [Conflict and Dialogue in Selected Multicultural Communities], Wrocław.

- Krzak Z., 2007, *Od matriarchatu do patriarchatu* [From Matriarchy to Patriarchy], Warszawa.
- Kusio U., 2011, *Tradycyjne kultury Afryki w paradygmacie determinizmu geograficznego Jareda Diamonda* [Traditional Cultures of Africa in the Paradigm of Jared Diamond's Geographic Determinism], [in:] J. Adamowski, M. Wójcicka (eds.), *Tradycja dla współczesności. Ciągłość i zmiana. Tradycja w tekstach kultury* [Tradition for Contemporaneity. Continuity and Change. Tradition in Cultural Texts], vol. 4, Lublin.
- Machut-Mendecka E., 2008, *Kobieta bez zasłony. Muzułmanka w świetle wiary i kultury* [Woman with no Veil. Muslim Women in the Light of Faith and Culture], [in:] *Być kobietą w Oriencie* [Being a Woman in the Orient], D. Chmielowska, B. Grabowska, E. Machut-Mendecka (eds.), Warszawa.
- Meier M., 1998, *Islam* [Islam], [in:] M. Kardasz, Z. Jurkowlaniec, B. Lada (eds.), *Wielkie kultury świata. Islam. Chiny. Japonia. Kultury andyjskie* [Great Cultures of the World. Islam. China. Japan. The Andean Cultures], Warszawa.
- Trzaskowski Z., 2011, *Tradycja religijna w procesie przemian kulturowych* [Religious Tradition in the Process of Cultural Transformations], [in:] J. Adamowski, M. Wójcicka (eds.), *Tradycja dla współczesności. Ciągłość i zmiana. Tradycja w tekstach kultury* [Tradition for Contemporaneity. Continuity and Change. Tradition in Cultural Texts], vol. 4, Lublin.

Internet sources:

- www.eioba.pl/a723t/mezczyzni-i-kobiety-w-islamie [accessed on 06.01.2015].
- www.euroislam.pl [accessed on 15.10.2014].

Summary

Men and women in Islam: between the stereotype and the reality in Northern Sudan

The article explores social and religious discourses on gender in Sudan and how this relates to the gender politics of this country. It explores what sexual politics are and why the idea of gender provides a useful analytical tool for looking at the culture of the country.

Keywords

gender, Islam, stereotype, Sudan

English translation: Anna Moroz-Darska

Tłumaczenie sfinansowano ze środków Ministerstwa Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego na podstawie umowy nr 661/P-DUN/2018 z dnia 13 lipca 2018 roku w ramach realizacji zadania 1 – stworzenie anglojęzycznych wersji wydawanych publikacji w 2018 roku.

The translation was financed with funds made available by the Ministry of Finance and Higher Education under contract No. 661/P-DUN/2018 of 13 July 2018 as a part of the execution of task 1: the creation of English-language versions of the issued publications in 2018.