

Tradition versus Modernity: Urban Southern Sudanese Women

By John-Gay N. Yoh (*)



(*) Mr. Yoh is a Sudanese student working on his Master's degree in Political Science at the American University of Beirut.

Iraqi Men Free to Kill Adulteress Kins

Iraqi men can now kill their mothers, wives, or daughters who have committed adultery without fear of legal prosecution, according to a decree endorsed at the end of Iran-Iraq war, by Iraqi authorities (1). "Any Iraqi who kills niece or his cousin on his father's side, for adultery, will not be brought to justice," The weekly Al-Ithad quoted the decree. It said Iraqi men would also not be prosecuted for killing the lovers of their women relatives. "If the act of adultery takes place in the family home".

If such killings are carried out outside the family home, an Iraqi man will be sentenced to prison and will no longer face the death penalty according to the decree. The Revolutionary Command Council said the new decree would "protect society against vice while promoting virtue and morality."

Based on informal sources we were told that the so-called common justifications for this law claims to supervise a large majority of Iraqi women whose husbands have been at war for so long, leaving them with Asian and Egyptian male caretakers and servants to tend to their domestic needs.

Such a law is a cruel violation of human rights and explicit discrimination against women •

(1) Produced from: The Nations, 14/3/90, Pakistan

Thirty years ago, it was impossible for a researcher to discuss views pertaining to women's rights in this part of the world. In fact, it was irrational to speak of any rights for women, for there was no such thing as women's rights.

Southern Sudanese society, like many African societies, is typically traditional/tribal, governed by restricting norm and customs. Women were/are confined to family and domestic duties such as raising children, cooking, cleaning and farming. It was not possible for a woman to think of herself as equal to a man. Concepts of social equality, social justice and liberation were unheard of in Southern Sudan.

Hence, it seems that women's rights saw the light in the 1960s

when formal schooling for women became official. Primary schools for girls were opened in the early 1950s and 1960s; and intermediate and secondary schools followed a while later. However, legislative action on the expansion of the educational system did not, necessarily, entail enrollment of all the girls who wished to go to school. In fact, enrollment was largely and directly related to demographic factors, especially urban population. For instance, the female students were limited to the children and relatives of city residents and government officials. Thus, enrollment was bound to increase or decrease depending on the degree of rural to urban migration. Furthermore, the female students, who received a formal education, were later recruited by the government as clerks, secretaries, teachers or they joined nursing training centers to become professional nurses.

Southern Sudan, on another hand, experienced a dramatic change at all levels, due to an intellectual awakening, which included women in the public sector, in the 70s. Following the peace settlement in 1972, Southern Sudan was granted local autonomy and a loose decentralized government. The new government proceeded to inaugurate new schools for girls, especially secondary schools. Consequently, females got a regular and formal education, and began participating more directly and actively in all aspects of life. Hence, female secondary school teachers increased in number and others Sudanese women participated in politics. Some of them were elected to Parliament in the mid 70s and became the available medium through which other women were recruited to professions in the public and private sectors

Nevertheless, traditional sex roles and customs for women persist to our very day. For instance, traditional roles of wife, mother, housekeeper, act as prerequisites for the success or acceptance of a Sudanese woman in any public occupation or profession. Being a descent, loyal and respected housewife are essential elements in her career, regardless of how irrelevant they may be for her and for her family. Consequently, the career oriented South Sudanese woman experiences significant difficulties trying to cope with traditional expectations and the demands of a career. In the last decade, urban Sudanese men, especially in the Upper Nile area, tend to prefer to marry traditional girls with a rural rather than urban background. This is manifested by a tendency for traditional radicalism opposing educated classes who seem to think that society is adapting alien cultural mores other than its own. It follows that the demands of urban and educated women have become an economic and an intellectual "burden", which do not apply to simple rural women.

Like many Third world countries, western concepts of liberation, sexual equality, social justice, and the call for women's involvement in society reached Southern Sudan. Seeing an opportunity for freedom, Sudanese women hastened to seek a college education, where such concepts are propagated.

Some of the changes that can be noticed are:

1. A girl's husband was chosen for her by her parents without consultation, some thirty years ago. Nowadays, the marriage does not happen without the bride's consent and choice of husband.



2. Employment of women is not longer related to social class and (privileged) acquaintances, but to merit and qualifications.

Southern Sudan has undergone significant change from traditionalism to modernity. Hence, exposure to western, "modern" values of liberation help diffuse radical traditionalism. The first phase has been more education for females in a society where women were marginal throughout modern history. Recruitment of Sudanese women in work is another significant development towards removing sex discrimination at work and in society. Hopefully, it won't be too long before other restricting customs and attitudes towards women are abolished in Sudan •