

The *hijab in* Nigeria, the woman's body and the feminist private/public Discourse

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Introduction

A silent revolution in Muslim women's veils has been taking place in Nigeria for the last 30 years. Up to 1975 hardly any Muslim woman in northern Nigeria wore the *hijab*, while today one could not miss the growing number of women who wear it. By *hijab*, I am not making any distinction between the many types of Arab/Middle Eastern veiling styles.¹ The distinction made here is between the Middle Eastern veiling, often tightly fastened around the face, which either covers only the head or as far down as the heels, and the Nigerian types. While the *hijab* might seem exclusively Islamic, it is rather as a cultural expression of the Middle East, which today is associated mostly with Muslims. From the mid 1970s, the *hijab* began to be worn by women in institutions of higher education in Nigeria. Because of where and who the wearers were, one could infer that the *hijab* has its origins in the values of the urban middle class. By the late 1980s, its use had spread to other classes of urban women and gradually to some of their rural sisters. By the 1990s, the idea of the *hijab* had begun to pose a challenge to governments' uniforms policy in the public service sector such as the nursing profession. With the introduction of Islamic law in 1999, some of the Muslim states introduced the *hijab* as a compulsory part of girls' uniforms in state schools. The *hijab* is becoming visually louder and a compulsory part of female dressing in the certain public space. Yet, the *hijab* as a subject of academic discourse about women's access to that space has remained to say the least covert, if it is ever written about. What does the dress change mean? How political and what kind of politics is it about?

The aim of this paper is to locate the politics of *hijab* as Muslim feminists have presented it and how it can be understood in Nigeria in the politics of the woman's body and access to the public space. The woman's body here means the social perceptions of what it means to be a woman from the physiological, the emotional as well as mental attributes of femininity. The paper begins with a brief working understanding of the public space discussed in relation to other African Muslim cultures and the place of the *hijab* in the politics of spaces. It is followed up with a brief historical background of the turning point in the question of women in politics in Nigeria. Throughout the article, the arguments of the feminists will be woven into a discursive analysis of women and politics, shifting from the present to the past of Islam in Nigeria. The objective is to highlight the link between the local context and the process of creating a global monotypic Islam and women's role in the public space. I propose that the most potent symbol of the monotypic process is the *hijab*.

Spaces in Muslim cultures

What is the public space? Does the public space mean all spaces outside the house? What is the situation of Muslim women in Nigeria in the public space? Feminist critiques of Western thought about women, Leonore Davidoff says, is "linked to the construction of highly significant categories, the complicated- and slippery- notions of public and private".² Since

¹ Types of Middle Eastern veils: *niqab* -covers the face leaving the area around the eyes clear; *burka* - covers the entire face and body, with a mesh screen for the eyes; *al-amira* - a two piece a close fitting cap; *shayla* - rectangular cloth thrown over the head usually exposing the front of the neck; the *khimar* - a long, cape-like veil that hangs down to the waist covering the head to the shoulders completely, leaving the face open; and the Iranian *Chador* - loosely covers the whole body.

² Leonore Davidoff, "Regarding some 'Old Husbands' Tales: public and private in feminist history" in, Joan B. Landes, *Feminism, the public and the private*, Oxford, 1998, p.164.

the Western position is not my concern here, I will refer you to them.³ However, the dichotomous character of the private/public spaces is also palpable in Muslim cultures. The *hijab* debates symbolise the gendered interface of that dichotomy. Consequently, two points raised in the Western discourse, which are important in the Islamic, are incorporated in this analysis. Firstly, the diverse and the shifting private/public boundaries in Nigeria, and secondly, the basis on which the separateness of the two spheres is determined.

There are differences between Nigerian concepts of spaces and those in other Muslim societies, for example in the geo-spatial private/public space. Take the design of a house in Omdurman, the headquarters of the Mahdist movement in Sudan in the late 19th century.⁴ In this design, the house has two access doors, where the door at the back of the house, opens onto the back door of the opposite house. This door is the entrance and exit passage exclusively for the females. The door of the same house that opens to the street is the male entrance and exit. The author of the study, Farah, argues that the existence of the two doors indicates a “parallel relationship” of the sexes.⁵ In comparison, traditional houses among the Hausa and the Kanuri have only one access door without any limitation based on sex, age or time of day. Based on the location of the door relative to the outside, the traditional design here seems to afford a more evenhanded geo-spatial access to the public space to both sexes than the Sudanese does. The relative gender equality symbolised by access to the house can be seen in the observations of European travellers across the African continent in previous centuries. Schultze, visited Borno at the beginning of the 20th century and observes that most houses are round mud huts with conical thatched roofs, surrounded by thatch matting, overgrown with gourd tendrils - designs which are still visible in rural areas. Houses of the rich in towns were made of mud, were rectangular single- or two-storey rooms, surrounded by high mud walls.⁶ These designs are the same as that of the Hausa.⁷ Shultze does not indicate the number of doors of the Kanuri house, but as it is today, traditional houses have single doors. While doors in themselves may not indicate the extent of Kanuri or Hausa women’s roles in the public space, we can nonetheless deduce that the house design had a limited barring effect between the public/private divide. He observes, “the extremely coquettish Kanuri lady is enabled to play a definite part in public life, and who even apart from this shows none of the reserve of her sisters in strict Mohammedan countries. This freedom goes so far that, at least in the larger towns, the women show themselves in the streets and exhibit an exceedingly wanton demeanor, to which even the ladies of royal blood form no exception.”⁸ Written documents of the 19th century, including that of the Sokoto jihadists, indicate the same free spirit of the Central Sudan woman.⁹ One might go further to suggest

³ Ibid, pp. 164-194. Susan Moller Okin, “Gender, the public, and the private” in, Anne Phillips (ed.), *Feminism and Politics*, Oxford & New York, 1998, pp. 116-141. Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, New York, Basic Books, 1989.

⁴ The Mahdist movement of the 1880s in the Sudan was contemporaneous with the Sokoto Caliphate and had some influence in the Caliphate, which is why I chose Omdurman.

⁵ Eman Abdelrahman Farah, *House Forms and Social Norms: spatial analysis of domestic architecture in Wad-Nubbawi, Sudan*, Gothenburg, 2000, p.151.

⁶ Dr A. Shultze, *The Sultanate of Bornu*, London, 1968 (1913), p.175-176.

⁷ For designs and photographs of a Hausa house see, Constance Larrimore, *A Resident’s Wife in Nigeria*, London & New York, 1908, pp. 76 & 104. F. W. Taylor & A. G. G. Webb, *Accounts of conversations describing certain customs of the Hausas*, London, 1932, pp. 169-191. Major Denham, Captain Clapperton & Doctor Oudney, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa in the Years 1822, 1823 and 1824*, 2 vols., London, 1985 (1826), p. 103. H. Barth, *Barth’s Travels in Nigeria: extracts from the journal of Heinrich Barth’s sketch of the house he stayed in*, p. 168.

⁸ Shultze, p. 171-172

⁹ Major Denham, Captain Clapperton & Doctor Oudney, p. 94. Thomas Hodgkin (ed.), *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology*, London, Oxford & New York, OUP, 1975.

that the house design does not reflect an intention to restrict women's access to the public space nor their secondary status within the house.

The 20th century witnessed new developments in house designs and positioning of the doors and of the sexes within and outside it. In Omdurman, Farah shows that where the house is in the Western style or its adaptation, the living room is a male domain and is nearest to the door, which is in the high wall surrounding the grounds on which the house stands.¹⁰ Although the new houses have two or more storeys, with sections occupied by separate households of the same extended family, each section has two access doors at the ground floor. "The kitchen entrance is meant to be used as 'service' entrance" and the women's complaint is that since men occupied the living room their only access was through the kitchen.¹¹ In the 1970s, the Nigerian middle class witnessed a growth in numbers, political and economic influence, made possible by the high price of petroleum.¹² According to Watts, in the early 1970s, the construction industry alone accounted for over 20% of Nigeria's industrial growth, with urban housing as the key areas of that growth.¹³ The middle class began to live in Western semi- and detached-types of single storey houses. The Western designs unlike the Nigerian have both front and back doors and sit on plots of land of several square meters. These houses are therefore less compact relative to neighbouring houses, but more compact within. Having taken over the houses of the British officers, the middle class began to construct extensions and high walls to enclose the houses. If they are newly constructed western-designed houses, enclosing the rear with a high wall is tailored into the original design. In these houses, one could already see two processes underway. Firstly, and increasingly so, the rear door of the house, which often went through the kitchen, became the female door. Secondly, the living room door, which looks out onto the street, became the access and domain of men. In some households women and children are not allowed into the living room, not to mention them using the door to access the street. With the change in the housing style, shrinking the boundary of the public space for women had begun. This delimitation of the geo-physical space, of containing women in the house, is also an expression of limiting the non-material freedoms women had.

The concept of the physical separateness of the private/public space in Nigeria might have as much in common with Western feminist debates including the contradictions in it, as it might have with that of the Arab/Middle Eastern. The specific reference here is to the liberal perception of the physical house as a private sphere as opposed to the spaces outside it. Yet, neither in Nigeria nor in the Middle East are women completely excluded from the generic public sphere. The Hausa and Kanuri were and are sedentary agricultural societies where women have always been arable farm workers. Their tools, crop types and tropical climate play fundamental roles in dressing styles, as opposed to herding and other farming systems.¹⁴ With the hoe, calabashes and other tools of grain processing still the main implements of farming, as it has been for centuries, it is neither ideologically nor is it practicable to enforce

H. Barth, p.164.

¹⁰ Farah, p. 61-64.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 62.

¹² For the process of the expanding middle class see the many articles in Michael Watts (ed.) *State, Oil and Agriculture in Nigeria*, Berkeley, 1987, especially Watts' article, "Agriculture and oil-based accumulation: stagnation or transformation", pp.58-84 & p. 64.

¹³ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁴ For photographs of women in farming see, Michael Mortimore & William M. Adams, *Working the Sahel: environment and society in Northern Nigeria*, London & New York, Routledge, 1999, especially, pp. 149-161. Also see, Hauwa Mahdi, *Gender and Citizenship: Hausa women's political identity from the Caliphate to the Protectorate*, 2006, pp. 114, 158 & 176.

the *hijab*, or indeed any kind of veil on farming women. The 19th century debates in the Central Sudan was not about if women should be in the public space, but about political office holding. We also know that the leading woman activist in the 19th century, Nana Asma'u encouraged women to dress decently during the Sokoto jihad, but she did not equate decency with wearing the *hijab*.¹⁵ I have discussed on two previous occasions that Muslim women were central actors in the public space as a workspace in the 19th century, except in the administrative bureaucracy.¹⁶ The participation of women in the political space is still the main discourse in Nigeria even if it is often wrapped up in religious language. Because of that, the *hijab* is also a class debate, since farming women cannot work with any kind of veil. During the decolonisation process, especially in the 1950s, Muslim women's role in politics once again became a subject of debate, but the *hijab* was not perceived as a prerequisite for their participation. The *hijab* can only be a post-1974 concern of the aristocratic and/or middle classes, when petroleum took over from farming as Nigeria's primary foreign exchange earner. Those who argue for and those who argue against the inclusion of Muslim women in politics must confront the meaning and diverse dimensions of veiling in the political process. What is the *hijab*?

Types of veils and Nigeria's public culture

In this section, the main point is to compare the types of veils Nigerian women wore before the 1970s to those after that date to enable us understand why the change occurred and why it has assumed the monotypic tone. What has changed about the woman's body that necessitated the increasing use of the *hijab*? The simple answer to the first part of the question is of course that nothing has changed in the woman's body. The question(s) we need to address is therefore what led to the change of perception of the woman's body. I am proposing here that two concurrent processes, one internal to Nigeria and the other external to it, are in the centre of that change, and both are political. Those political processes will be analysed later, first we will look at the types of women's dressing before the 1970s.

An Iranian cleric, Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, rhetorically asked his wife-to-be: "Is a person's Muslimness in his beard?"¹⁷ Borrowing the intent of that question, we could also ask, is a woman's Muslimness in her *hijab*? There is a difference between the *hijab* and the beard, the former being of Qur'anic origin and the other of the Prophet's tradition. The different origins of the two puts the discourse of the *hijab* in the context of what the fundamental message of Islam is. It is interesting how Islamists have made the *hijab* the standard measure of faith, to a degree where the message of justice in Islam, is dwarfed by the spectre of that cloth. Muslim feminists have examined the *hijab* in dichotomous pairs – liberating/oppressing, piety/deception, or as obligatory/optional or religious/cultural apparel. "The *hijab* of oppression and the *hijab* of liberation look the same. The *hijab* of deception and the *hijab* of integrity look the same".¹⁸ Waddud answers my rhetorical question when she says, one cannot judge "a woman's sense of personal bodily integrity or piety from 45 inches of cloth than you can spot a fly on the wall at two thousand feet".¹⁹ If neither a man's beard or its length, nor a woman's *hijab* is a measure of piety what is the controversy about. A recent fatwa i.e. a legal

¹⁵ Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister Nana Asma'u 1793-1865: teacher, poet and Islamic leader*, London, 2000.

¹⁶ Hauwa Mahdi, *Gender & Citizenship: Hausa women's political identity from the Caliphate to the Protectorate*, Gothenburg, 2006. Hauwa Mahdi, "The position of women in Metropolitan Borno from c. 1750 to 1893" MA thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1987.

¹⁷ Ziba Mir-Hosseini & Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for Reform*. London, GBR: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2006, p 52. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/gubselibrary/>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.

¹⁹ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: women's reform in Islam*, Oxford, One World, 2006, pp. 219-220.

formal opinion or interpretation by a “jurisconsult” is firm that “A Muslim woman is obliged to wear the *hijab* as soon as she reaches puberty”.²⁰

Although they differ in some respects, Waddud’s understanding of the *hijab* and that of Fatima Mernissi are similar based on their hermeneutic engagement with the Qur’an.²¹ Mernissi and Waddud are interesting for this article because of the history of Islam in Nigeria. Mernissi’s special area is Morocco, the route from which Islam arrived in Hausaland and she has a personal association with the Muslim women in Morocco. Waddud as an African-American has a perspective that spans the two dominant world religions – Christianity and Islam. She is acutely aware of the repercussions of the literal readings of the Qur’an, from a close personal history – slavery – as should Nigerians. The main difference between Mernissi and Waddud here is that the latter does not deal with the genesis of the Quranic verse about *hijab*, while the former locates it in its history and scrutinizes the epistemology of the Arabic word.²² Waddud questions the elevation of the *hijab* to the sixth pillar of Islam, a position far beyond its symbolic value as an aspect of one’s Islamic/Muslim identity. She also touched on the implicit reduction of women to their sexuality in some of the arguments that favour the *hijab*.²³ The exegetic similarities and differences of Mernissi and Waddud to me signify the importance of history in the use and discourses of *hijab*.

First, let us look at another version of the *hijab* as a Middle Eastern cultural form, its relation to politics of the times and where similarities with politics of the *hijab* in the Nigeria can be drawn. Eva Andersson has conducted a detailed study of the changing pattern of dressing and some of the gender and other socio-political issues underlying the changes in the Swedish Middle Ages. She gives a description of a long flowing women’s gown at the beginning of the 13th century, a style that had been adapted from outside the Nordic region.²⁴ On the head, women wore two items of headgear with the inner garment worn tightly round the face held with a pin at the neck, and the outer garment pinned by the ears, giving one the image of the type of headgear worn by Catholic nuns today.²⁵ By the 15th century, women’s veils in both Sweden and Norway had become more varied from what they were previously. Women wore their hats directly on the head rather than over the veil as they did in previous centuries.²⁶ Andersson concludes that the changes in women’s headgear, which had occurred since the 14th century, were “interpreted as both indecent and threatening. The woman’s head covering is enshrined in the Bible”, it was argued.²⁷ Both the Church and some members of the public argued at the time, that the new headgear the women wore was not only a challenge to the Biblical injunction but also to the authority of men. The women were accused of turning the

²⁰ Group of Muftis (Jurisconsult), “Fatwa” in, John J. Donohue & John L. Esposito (eds.), *Islam in Transition: Muslim perspectives*, New York, & Oxford, 2007, p. 213.

²¹ Amina Waddud, *Qur’an and Woman: rereading the Sacred Text from a woman’s perspective*, New York & Oxford, Oxford University Press (OUP), 1999. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: male-female dynamics in Muslim society*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Saqi Books, 2003 (1975). Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Perseus Books, 1991 (1987). See Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: the religious debate in contemporary Iran*, London & New York, I. B. Tauris, 2000 (1999), pp. 3-10, where she has a concise analysis of many other “feminism-based” approaches to the study of Muslim women. She also observes, in page 5 that Mernissi’s hermeneutics approach is a later development, but her consider observation is not important for the purpose of this paper

²² Waddud, 2006, pp. 219 -225

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.

²⁴ Eva Andersson, *Kläderna och Människan i medeltidens Sverige och Norge*, Göteborg, 2006, p. 167.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 170, 176-7 and photograph on p.178

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 183

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 274. All the quotes from this book are translated by me.

religious symbol of female modesty on its head and using it as a weapon of seduction.²⁸ It seems, in Sweden as in other European societies, women's headgear changed from the traditional open head, to the Christian/Middle Eastern and then gradually back to the open head. In that process, as Andersson points out in the case of the Nordic countries, class and contact with the outside world had been important factors as to how women adapted their headgear, why and when.

The diversity of Nigeria means that there is a variety of traditional veiling types before the *hijab*. Each veil type has its own history rooted in the cultural exchanges and/or technological capacity and classes of women in each community. I have chosen the Hausa veils called *kallabi* and, *gyale* and/or *mayafi*, and the Kanuri *mandil* and *lafaya*. *Kallabi* is a scarf of approximately one square meter or less, which is folded into a triangle and firmly tied from the forehead and knotted at the back of the neck to cover only the head, sometimes only partially. An alternative to *kallabi* is *saro*, which has the same width as *kallabi* but is twice longer but less often used and covers only the head, often partially. *Gyale* is rarely less than 2 meters long, with varying widths but seldom exceeds a meter. It is used in many ways: either it is folded lengthwise and thrown back over the shoulders making a triangle on the chest, or folded to a quarter of its full length and thrown on one shoulder; or it is spread out to its full length and width to cover from the head down or from the shoulder down, as far as the material can go. When it is adorned in the last named style it becomes *mayafi*, meaning that which covers. The Kanuri use the *mandil*, which is the same size as *gyale* and is thrown loosely to cover the head. Although it has become very popular since the 1970s, until that time only women who have made the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca used it. The *lafaya*, which is a material of similar length and width as the Indian *sari*, is wrapped around the body in a similar fashion as the Indian except that it is spread out to cover the shoulders from the back to the front. When necessary, for example against the sun, it is also used to cover the head. *Lafaya* is also sometimes worn only around the upper body excluding the head, and allowed to trail all the way to the ground. The *mandil* is not mentioned by name or described in any text before the 20th century. However, Barth observed in 1851 that a woman of Kukawa the capital of Borno went "strolling about the streets with her gown trailing after her in the ground".²⁹ This clearly refers to the Kanuri use of *lafaya* as an upper-body fashion accessory, a style they continued to exhibit into the 1970s.

In both the Hausa and the Kanuri women's cultures hairdressing is an art form with some practical meanings, such that few women covered the head in either the 19th or the first decades of the 20th centuries. European documents tend to show either sketches of women's hairstyles or describe them rather than mention veils and scarves of any kind, including the *kallabi* and the *mandil*. The descriptions of women's hairstyles indicate that most women went about with the open head. The hair braids called *doka* for the Hausa and *kala yasku*, *goto* and *shangalci* for the Kanuri, and how the styles are decorated with silver pins and hair dyeing are made by the travellers and have survived.³⁰ By the beginning of the 20th century however, one sees in both sketches and photographs Hausa women at work wearing *saro*.³¹ Both *gyale* and *lafaya* were used mainly when going out on occasions other than farm or

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Barth, p. 164.

³⁰ See, Shultze, p. 174, for the description of *goto*. *Kala yasku* is the hairstyle for girls, which is changed with a special ceremony after the first year of marriage. For both Hausa and Kanuri hairstyles see, Barth, p. 109, p. 158 & p. 164.

³¹ See, Mahdi, 2006 for a few photographs. Also see, Martin S. Kisch, *Letters and Sketches from Northern Nigeria*, London, 1910, pp. 44, 58 & 92.

farm-related work. When veils were used, married women adopted either the upper-body veil excluding the head or the head-covered option purely as matter of personal choice, while girls and divorcees tended to use neither. I know from personal experience too that most Kanuri women went bareheaded up to the 1970s. By the 1980s the attitude of men to the open head began to change and they began making derogatory comments with Islamic connotations on women on the streets, for going bareheaded. Around the same time, I was accosted at a mosque in a Hausa area for not wearing the *hijab*. By the late 1980s, there was a tendency for men to be brazen towards women who did not wear the *hijab* and outright hostility towards teenage girls and women who did not wear any veil at all. Why are the dressing styles of women important in the discussion of the contemporary politics in Nigeria? Because even if we could disagree about whether the changes are liberating/oppressing and so on, the fact is that they reflect a change in how women access the public space. Whether the position of Muslim feminists and the Fatwa quoted above differ or not, the change to the *hijab* gives us an opportunity to explore why and how the change has occurred. The limited use of the veil in previous centuries and the increasing use of the *hijab* since the 1970s might have two possible explanations. Firstly, it might indicate different perceptions of the woman's body between the pre- and post 1970s among Nigerian Muslims. Secondly, it might indicate that Muslim women have had a different standing in the political processes before 1970s, and another since then.

I believe the changes in veiling style indicate a renegotiation, even as or because women's numbers in the urban public spaces have continued to increase. The *hijab* might indicate women's persistence of pursuing their right to be in the public space. It is simplistic to explain the change to the *hijab* as a non-political form of Islamic reawakening since the local veils are just as good if/when women choose to use them. Rather both the *hijab* and the housing style seem to indicate a step in men's determination to seclude women and exclude them from the political process. Thus the change in Nigeria could mean as Fatima Mernissi, based on her study of Islamic spatial rules in Morocco concludes, "reflects the division between those who hold authority and those who do not, those who hold spiritual powers and those who do not".³² As I will show in the subsequent sections, the process reflects both a renegotiation of women's role in politics, especially in the state public sector, and their status in it. For, in the 1970s women had begun to enter the public sector in larger numbers, competing for positions of authority with men in institutions where some decision making took place. In addition, from 1978 -1982, the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) governments of Kano and Kaduna States had changed the education policy, intending to increase the volume and quality of girls' and adult women's education. The governments had abandoned the elitist secondary school boarding system for day schooling, which enabled them to increase the number of schools, enroll more girls in all levels of education and invest in literacy classes for adult women. This had meant an upsurge of teenage girls and women in the streets of urban centres of the two states in daytime. The rise of the *hijab*, at the same time these changes in the urban workplace were taking place, cannot be by accident. How we explain the change is open to debate. One of the explanations for the *hijab* has to be, among other reasons, a means for Muslim women to participate in the urban work place without men reducing their contribution to their sexuality. It could also mean the *hijab* is a male demand on women, a compromise women were prepared to make, to enable them access the urban spaces previously dominated by men.

To argue my case I will discuss the two situations, education and politics, and their implications to women's access to the public space.

³² Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: male-female dynamics in Muslim society*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 2003 (1975), p.138.

Women's western education and the public space

The general histories of the Sokoto Jihad and of the Caliphate are well researched.³³ Some recent studies of the encounter between colonial rule and the elite of the Caliphate are also producing new insights into the processes of the jihad.³⁴ Further, recent studies of the Caliphate and the encounter are adopting gender issues in both processes.³⁵ Although a thread from the past could be discerned in the present, the place of the *hijab* can be linked more with the politics of the colonial encounter than it is with that of the Caliphate. Muslim women are the group of Nigerians whose education has been given the least and the last consideration, both in the distant past as well as the recent. The Christian missions, who were the leading educators, were not even allowed to open schools in Muslim areas throughout most of the colonial period.³⁶ Western education in Northern Nigeria (NN) was therefore solely a project of the colonial government and the emirs and of whether they deemed it worthy of investing in. According to Umar, the education policy envisaged by F. D. Lugard came as part of the British policy of Islamic containment and surveillance.³⁷ The emirs were, after a brief period of negotiation with the government keen to open schools for boys with "claims of birth".³⁸ Thus, Lugard's framework and the emirs' cooperation with him to establish schools have in them an intrinsic class dimension in addition to the Islamic containment objective. Tibendarana rightly observes that aristocratic boys were educated with the intention of incorporating them into the Native Authority (NA) bureaucracy.³⁹ Girls on the other hand, were never considered fit to hold public offices. Thus, while the government commenced the education of boys as early as 1910, girls' schools did not begin until after 1928. When it started the class dimension was also an issue as it did for the boys. As A. Booker complained in 1937, "the girls in the list sent to me were unsuitable as they were of very low grade. I want girls of good family..."⁴⁰

The case for girls' education is much more complex than researchers have presented it and it is beyond the scope of this article to enter the details of that question. However, part of the built-in intent in the policy, was to maintain men's literary advantage over women, one of the

³³ Yusufu Bala Usman, (ed.), *Studies in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate*, Lagos, 1979. Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London, 1977. J. F. Ade Ajayi, & Michael Crowder, (eds.), *History of West Africa*, 2 vols., London, 1977. Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: the life and times of the Shehu Usman dan Fodio*, New York, 1973.

³⁴ Muhammad S. Umar, *Islam and colonialism: intellectual responses of Muslims of Northern Nigeria to British rule*, Leiden-Boston, 2006. Yakubu, Alhaji Mahmood, *An Aristocracy in Political Crisis: The End of Indirect Rule and the Emergence of Party Politics in the Emirates of Northern Nigeria*, Aldershot, 1996. Yahaya, A. D., *The Native Authority System in Northern Nigeria, 1950 -70: A Study in Political Relations with Particular Reference to the Zaria Native Authority*, Zaria, 1980.

³⁵ Mahdi, 2006. Beverly B. Mack & Jean Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asama'u scholar scribe*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2000. Boyd, Jean, *The Caliph's Sister Nana Asma'u 1793-1865: Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader*, London, 2000. Jean Boyd, "Nana Asma'u Fodio: her contribution to society" in, *Sunday Timp*, July 1, 1984.

³⁶ See, *CBMS/IMC Archives, Boxes 269 & 270*, School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), London, for the Mission/colonial government conflicts. Walter Miller, *Have we Failed in Nigeria?*, London, 1954. Edmund P. T. Crampton, *Christianity in Northern Nigeria*, Dublin, 1975.

³⁷ Umar, 2006, pp. 56.

³⁸ *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79A)*, Jean Trevor, "Education of Moslem Hausa Women from Sokoto", Rhodes House, Oxford, p. 90.

³⁹ NA stands for Native Authority. Peter Kazenga Tibendarana, "The beginnings of girls' education in the Native Administration schools in Northern Nigeria, 1930-1945" in, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 26, 1985, p. 93.

⁴⁰ Jean Trevor, "Education of Moslem Hausa Women from Sokoto" in, *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79 O)*, Rhodes House, Oxford, p. 56

pillars of patriarchy. The opening of girls' schools in Kano and Katsina was contentious contrary to Tibendarana's assertion.⁴¹ What is clear is that the officers did not wish to put on record what transpired between them and the emirs on the subject.⁴² Note too that by the time opening girls' schools was being negotiated between the two sides, the suspicion of the emirs against colonial rule had according to Lt. Governor C. W. Alexander, more or less dissipated.⁴³ In Mrs H. I. Kaita words, a graduate of one of the 5 women's teachers colleges in 1951, "men have used a false interpretation of Islam to subjugate women and restrict their education".⁴⁴ Muslim girls' education was a subject of a more intense debate and negotiation between the few British officers who wanted to implement it and the aristocracy who opposed it.⁴⁵ The idea that the emirs objected to western education for fear of conversion to Christianity, is a simplification of a problem that is traversed by many other factors, such as class and gender. The fact that the camps in the debate included both Hausa and British on either side of the divide indicates that a political explanation has to be sought rather than a simple religious explanation. Muslim scholars and British educators stood side-by-side in favour of women's education while, the aristocracy and the colonial officers stood together against it. One cannot but agree with Jean Trevor's conclusion, that the emirs and most officers saw education and its quality as a medium of reinforcing the established social hierarchy; and therefore access to it should depend on one's family background.⁴⁶ According to her, Lugard saw the value of girls education in terms of affording "youths [men] ... wives who can share their thoughts and sympathise in and understand their work ... [and women who as mothers can] exert in forming the character of her child."⁴⁷ As the Superintendent of Education, J. D. Clarke observed, "students [men] were accompanied to the Higher College by illiterate girls who performed the duties of servant and wife".⁴⁸

Thus, the importance of maintaining the patriarchal structure was a significant reason for men's opposition to girls' education. Consequently, when a policy was developed, it was designed to prepare girls only for house- and husband keeping.⁴⁹ The policy of educating girls to become servant-wives remained from 1928 into the late 1960s. The objective of the policy is confirmed further by gazetted advertisements for higher education and for jobs put out by the regional government where women were not expected to apply.⁵⁰ In the 1960s, the government was forced to increase the intake of girls in secondary schools.⁵¹ The impact of these girls on the psyche of this patriarchal society is much more than their numbers. It was these girls and, the boys of their generation who did not join the army to fight in the civil war,

⁴¹ Tibendarana, p. 94.

⁴² See, Miss Catherine Dinnick-Parr. MSS. Afr. S. "Education of Moslem Hausa Women from Sokoto" in, *MSS. Afr. S. 1889*, pp. 105-108. A. R. Allen, "Offering benefits on the land – the colonial education services in NN 1945-60" in, *MSS. Afr. S. 103 s 1 (9)*.

⁴³ "Memo by Lt. Governor N. P." 7th July 1932 in, *MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 276 16/6* Lethem, Rhodes House, Oxford.

⁴⁴ Mrs H. I. Kaita, "Women's education in the Northern States of Nigeria 1950-1972" in, Jean Trevor, *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79A)*, p. 37.

⁴⁵ Trevor, *1755 (79A)*

⁴⁶ Trevor, *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79 O)*, p.15.

⁴⁷ Trevor, *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79A)*, p. 98.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95-6.

⁴⁹ See the teaching curriculum in the 1940s in, Gladys Plummer, "Miscellaneous reports and memo on female education", 1945-47 in, *MSS. Afr. S. 1322*, Rhodes House, Oxford, p. 33.

⁵⁰ *Eastern Region of Nigeria Gazette*, No. 26, Vol. 8, pp. 258-9. *Eastern Region of Nigeria Gazette*, No. 37, Vol. 8, p. 380. *Eastern Region of Nigeria Gazette*, No. 59, Vol. 8, p. 714.

⁵¹ Chief Information Officer for Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Internal Affairs, "Government explains true position" in, *Nigerian Citizen*, July 23, 1958, p.6. For actual figures of girls in secondary schools see, Haroun Al-Rashid Adamu, *The North and Nigerian Unity: some reflections on the political, social and educational problems of Northern Nigeria*, Zaria, 1973, pp.38-39.

who operated the NN offices emptied of its southern employees.⁵² In this period, their role in the lower echelons of bureaucracy was established and their struggle for the higher offices began. Women's role in the bureaucracy in that era is a factor without which we might fail to grasp men's verbal violence against them and the *hijab* as their refuge. Men's hostility to girls' entry into the formal space is especially noticeable in the educational sector. In spite of the hostility many girls went for higher education. They have later "married beneath" their class to men who would allow them to work.⁵³ According to Kaita, many girls forced into marriage against their will have found it preferable to go into prostitution than remain married to men they care nothing for. In contrast, Abdullahi observes that the girls "saw their future role as wives and mothers and not as workers in an office or profession".⁵⁴ The latter assertion does not fit my experience of boarding school. Although there were girls who would rather not be in school the vast majority wanted to and envisaged their future as workers.

Overall, women's struggle for inclusion in the public space in general has to, in many senses, focus on men's attitude to them. That attitude is an important factor in the decisions women took about veiling. Men's language against their presence on the scene has often been expressed in sexual or psychologically degrading terms – centred on claims of women using their bodies or of losing their mind. This attitude also forms the beginning of the new perception of the woman's body and the delimitation of her presence in the public space. Thus, women's resort to the *hijab* can partially be understood as a liberating experience, of changing their appearance to avoid the insults.

The woman's body

What led to the change in the perceptions of the woman's body? The change of perception can be associated with increased urbanisation and the 'modernisation' of the society. The class structure witnessed major changes in which the middle class expanded as did its influence in the public sector, just as women began to occupy positions in that sector. With what the rest of the world called the oil crisis of 1974, the Nigerian government raked-in more wealth than it had ever done, raising the per capita and buying power of this class. According Alan Richards, the oil boom led to rise in income in the urban centres, in urban construction and in "rent-seeking activities."⁵⁵ These in turn encouraged a massive rural-urban migration in search of better living conditions. The oil-dependent state ceased to pay attention to farming. Women's role in farming, as indeed of men, became less vital to maintenance of the family.

The oil boom as many of the authors in Watts concur saw a decline in farming. Women formed part of that wave of migrants into the towns doing all kinds of work no longer limited to the state bureaucracy. Oil in other words, enabled the middle class to propagate its newly acquired values in the Muslim community, one of which was to seclude women from the urban public sector. If they could not seclude women in the house the seclusion could be borne in mobility – the *hijab*. The woman was no longer being judged and valued by her capacity to labour, but her aesthetic/sexual roles. This change was facilitated by the growing accessibility of television and video films in which the woman's physical/sexual body is highlighted. Her decreasing role in tilling the soil in reality and the images films conjure up is of women's capacity to think and act independently, and for men a fear of the collapse of patriarchy. Wearing the *hijab* for this reason is no longer a matter of women wanting to

⁵² Ramatu Abdullahi, *Self-concept and cultural change among the Hausa*, Ibadan, 1986, p. 62. North Central State is the present Kaduna and Katsina States.

⁵³ Trevor in, *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79A)*, Oxford, p. 82.

⁵⁴ Abdullahi, 1986, p. 63.

⁵⁵ Alan Richards, "Oil booms and agricultural development" in, Michael J Watts, pp. 85 -109.

protect themselves against men's hostility, but also of a man's demarcation of his ownership of her body. No other man, who could be a candidate for her hand should be able to cast a gaze on her. For that ownership to be realised none of the Nigerian veils, at least not in the way they had been adorned before, would have been adequate, it had to be the *hijab*.⁵⁶

Urbanisation, education, petro-wealth and the new roles women came to play in the 1970s can explain the rise of veiling among women, but explain the use of the *hijab* only partially. For a fuller understanding of the change from the national veils to the *hijab* we have to look at the conflicts between the Islamic organisations, their ideological leanings and international affiliations.

Islamic organisations in contemporary politics

A few years after independence, a number of religious organisations emerged, who interpreted the socio-economic problems of Nigeria in religious terms.⁵⁷ Each of these organisations has either a formal or non-formal women's wing which carries the message of the main body to women. While in 1980 there were only 54 Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) of the total 1350 in Nigeria, they had risen by the year 2000 to 523 and 4028, respectively.⁵⁸ The conflicts between Sufi leaders and an emerging opposition in the person of Alhaji Abubakar Gumi and their followers are an important stage in the politicisation of religion and the *hijab*.⁵⁹ Although the leaders of the sects and orders pursued their ideological battles at the intellectual plain, their followers often slugged it out on the streets.⁶⁰ As the sects got more engaged in politics and social work, opening clinics and schools, almost every attendant and client wears the *hijab*. Izala has declared many Nigerian "customs and traditions" un-Islamic, among them the traditional dressing and veils.⁶¹

As Loimeier points out, with the first coup, the death of Sir Ahmadu Bello the Premier of NN in 1966 and the civil war, Abubakar Gumi was left without political protection, but also with an opportunity to radicalise the Muslim public.⁶² Just as the civil war began, Gumi got airtime on Kaduna radio, which expanded his audience base in addition to the many pamphlets and newspapers articles he wrote. Today, many of Nigeria's over five hundred Islamic NGOs

⁵⁶ Note too that today many Christian churches in Nigeria also seek to impose stringent dress codes on women. Many of them forbid their women members to wear trousers or dresses that do not go below the knee.

⁵⁷ In sequential order the first is the *Jamat Nasril Islam* (JNI –Group for the Victory of Islam) in 1962, *Kungiyar Jama'ati Ahlis Sunna* 1977, *Jamat Izala al-Bida wa Iqamat al-Sunna* in 1978 and the Islamic movement of Nigeria (IMN) 1980. ⁵⁷ For details see, Loimeier, 2006. Muhammad Sani Umar, "Changing Islamic Identity in Nigeria from the 1960s to the 1980s: from Sufism to anti-Sufism" in, Louis Brenner (ed.) *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London, 1993, pp. 154-178. John Hunwick, "An African case study of political Islam: Nigeria" in, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 524, November 1992, pp. 143-155.

⁵⁸ Prof. M. A. Mohamed Salih, "Islamic NGOs in Africa: The Promise and Peril of Islamic Voluntarism" an occasional paper : Centre of Studies University of Copenhagen, March 2002 in, www.teol.ku.dk/CAS/

⁵⁹ For the conflicts between the Sufi's and their opponents see, Louis Brenner (ed.), 1993. Rüdiger Seesemann, "The Takfír debate: sources for the study of a contemporary dispute among African Sufis: part 1: The Nigerian arena" in, www.hf.uib.no/smi/sa/09/9

⁶⁰ Seesemann, pp. 69-70. For the conflicts between Islamic organisations see, Roman Loimeier, "Clashes between Islamists and Sufis and its outcome: the case study of Yan Izala and the Sufis in Nigeria" in, www.e-prism.org/images/Islam_in_Africa_newsletter - No6 -November 06. pdf

⁶¹ Loimeier, 2006, p.6. Umar, 1993, p. 157-8.

⁶² Roman Loimeier, "Islamic Reform and political change: the example of Gumi and the yan izala movement in Northern Nigeria" in, David Westerlund & Eva Evers Rosander (eds.), *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounter between Sufis and Islamists*, Uppsala, 1997, p. 290. For details of the development of the media see, Yusuf M. Adamu "Print and Broadcast media in northern Nigeria" in, www.kanoonline.com/downloads/Media

have hit the cyber space, including women's sites.⁶³ The proliferation of Islamic movements and their increasing occupation of the public space have seen the growth of violent sectarian conflicts in equal measure. As the 1970s wore on, especially with the debates in the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) underway in 1977/78, the focus of the movements, shifted from challenging each other to challenging the state.

Gumi saw the return to civilian rule as an opportunity, equating the voting to a jihad.

it is the duty of men and women to take up arms... Well [by analogy to this], it is [a duty] to cast a vote. Now since this [voting] will be beneficial to oneself and moreover beneficial to the Muslim community, it is Satan who prevents them from going out...As long as a man's wife covers her body properly... if this is not done, even to the point of letting unbeliever to predominate, then what is our positions? ... This is what makes me say that politics is more important than prayer... With politics one stands for payer and worship together, whereas prayer is only part of this...⁶⁴

Gumi's statement here reflects Muslim feminists' position that the texts of Islam have always been subjects of exegetic reinterpretation. The first hijab wearers, I know from observation, were initially the followers of Gumi who launched *Izala* in 1978. In complex processes of allegiances, trade-offs and cross-carpeting that began with the CDC, Gumi saddled Muslim women with the moral responsibility of the group and a duty to vote-in a Muslim president. Gumi renounced Sufism since the 1940s,⁶⁵ and was silent about the right of Muslim women to vote in both the 1959 and the 1964 elections. Only in 1978 did he begin to seek women's inclusion in the electoral process.

The 1970s are important landmarks for Muslim women, not only because of Gumi and the political processes of the Second Republic. They are also important because as the fight by the Muslim elite to include the creation of sharia court of appeal and its inclusion in the constitution raged on, Ibrahim Yaqoub Zaqaqi appeared on the political scene. In 1980, he launched the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) thus adding an Iranian-Shi'i dimension to political Islam in the country. An intense competition for support from ordinary Muslims has since ensued. As political parties seek support through their programs, so do the Islamic NGOs. Even more important to the issue of the *hijab* than the political polemics, is the concrete input the organisations are making in ordinary women's lives. Since the Nigerian governments at all levels have neglected the provision of basic services that facilitate individual and social security, these movements have turned that failure to their advantage. *Izala* and IMN model their interpretation of Islam in respect of social conduct on the Saudi-Wahhabi and Iranian doctrines respectively.⁶⁶ For IMN's inspirational source, one only needs to visit its homepage.⁶⁷ Engaged as they both are in adult and child education where the state has failed, they have also exerted pressure on women to wear the *hijab* as a precondition for the services they get. IMN asserts, one of its successes "is the formation of formal Islamic institutions and the uses of accurate veils (*hijabs*) for female[s]... in the movement."⁶⁸

⁶³ www.fomwan.org/, www.ui.edu.ng/mssn/sistersCorner, www.mujaahidahplanet.com/ & www.nigerianmuslims4marriage.com/.

⁶⁴ Loimeier, 1997, p. 293.

⁶⁵ Umar, 1993, p. 159.

⁶⁶ Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: a study of the society for the removal of innovations and reinstatement of tradition*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2002, pp. 123-125.

⁶⁷ www.islamicmovement.org.

⁶⁸ "The Declaration of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria: a prosperous silver jubilee" in, www.islamicmovement.org.

One of the aspects of Sufism applicable in ordinary living is its appreciation of some form of individuality in worship – what Umar has called “personal style”.⁶⁹ This perception of Islam and the dominance of the Sufi Orders had enabled women’s traditional African dressing style to survive the centuries. Since the Nigerian state has abdicated its responsibility to the citizenry, Izala and IMN through the services they provide, have acquired a social platform for launching their political strategies. These organisations compel women to abandon the local styles in favour of the Wahabi and Iranian dress codes, thereby directing Nigerian Muslims towards a monotypic view of gender in the public space. Since the introduction of Islamic laws in 1999, one of the advantages they have scored against their Sufi rivals is in instituting these dress codes. The Kano state governor, Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau, has this year reiterated his determination to extend the *hijab* beyond government schools into private ones.⁷⁰ He says, “such laws are currently being operated in our universities, go to BUK [Bayero University Kano] for example you can see lots of bill boards sensitising on the students about decent dress.”⁷¹ By the new codes and laws, the sharia governments and other institutions financed by the Nigerian state are illegitimizing women’s traditional dressing styles. More importantly the implication of the laws and codes is that if girls or women do not adhere to the code, they would not have access to education and other basic services in these states.

Does wearing the *hijab* have any political significance? Not necessarily, unless women are coerced into it; and they are offered equal services irrespective of how they dress. However, the conditions attached to obtaining the services the states and private organisations offer amounts to coercion. In addition, the named organisations each have certain ideological leanings, which they seek to impose on women in Nigeria. With a barrage of indoctrination through the media, induction in schools and Islamist state laws and other instruments of control, women’s dressing is being steered towards monotypic codes.

A form of self-defence mechanism for women is the creation of associations from which platform they can together seek social freedom and political inclusion. This form of struggle was made possible with the democratisation process of the late 1970s and the increase of women in the urban workplace. The religious organisations also draw their adherents from the same pool of urban women and youths.⁷² What do women say about Islam, and the *hijab*?

Muslim women’s perceptions in Nigeria

What questions do women activists and organisations raise about the nature of interpreting Islamic texts and its role in Nigerian politics? Of the two parts of the question, one is ideological and the other on the matter of practical application. Most Nigerian feminists tend to address both sides of the problem, but seldom connect applicability to the diversity of cultures in the country. Do they see the *hijab* as a political symbol?

Fatima L. Adamu, as most Muslim analysts, has in a paper discussed the three possible positions from which the Qur’an and the practices of the prophet can be interpreted regarding the role of women in politics. The three positions are: a) Islam has entrusted men as overseers of women’s affairs so they do not need to be active themselves. She quotes the relevant texts they use to support their positions. b) There is precedence for the participation of women in

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 164.

⁷⁰ Yusha’u Adamu Ibrahim (Reporter), “Compulsory hijab affects only Muslim students” in, www.dailytrust.com, 7 May, 2007

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Loimeier, 2006

the political and textual history of Islamic societies which suggests women should be free to participate. c) Women can participate in politics and be elected as long as they are old and do not occupy the highest offices. She rightly points out the discontent of Muslim women against the male politicians who seek to discredit their candidacy at election times.⁷³ Two issues can be observed. Firstly, although the first two positions do not mention women's dressing, most Islamic organisations expect their female members to do so. The second issue is about the location of bio-sexual identity in arguments that justify women's exclusion from the political space.

In 2002, the leader of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN); Bilkisu Yusuf, published an article in response to the pressure being exerted on women in the sharia states.⁷⁴ In tune with Eshkevari she writes, "...one of the states toyed with the idea of forcing men to grow beards. Perhaps this will allow us to measure their piety according to the length of their beards"! ... Two other sharia states also toyed with the idea of imposing a uniform of plain cotton *hijab* on women, with different colours reflecting the marital status of the wearer." Yusuf concludes along Waddud's line, "If *hijab* uniforms are to be imposed on women, it should also be imposed on men with different colours reflecting the number of wives they have or whether they are single. Muslim women would also find this information handy..."⁷⁵ By Yusuf's presentation it is clear that the political intent of the *hijab* is well understood. The governments have since her paper imposed the *hijab* on girls and by underhand methods forced it on women too. In the 1970s the *hijab* could be seen as liberating since women made the decision to adorn it. In the 21st century the headgear symbolises the oppression of women in the public space, it being an imposition by Islamist NGOs and Islamist governments. Still, there is a difference between the textual approaches of Eshkevari, Mernissi and Waddud on one hand and FOMWAN on the other. The differences arise from two interrelated methodological postulates. The three named authors have an underlying method of situating the Qur'an in its history and its principal intent, rather than reading it based on the literal Arabic word, a language whose every term is gendered. Adopting a deconstructionist approach situates language at a crucial point for understanding the message of a situation, while Yusuf/Fomwan does not. Waddud defines her approach to the Qur'an as a "rereading", where other than rituals, "for any other part of the text to be deemed universal, it cannot require mimicry".⁷⁶ Each position is informed, among other factors, by the climate in which they function. As Yusuf points out, politics and extra-judicial violence in Nigeria are breeding "intellectual poverty among Muslims ... [who] fear of being castigated as a heretic", if they should be critical.⁷⁷

Other NGOs such as the BAOBAB for human rights and the Sisters in Islam in Malaysia (SIS) seem to have begun this move in their activist approaches. One of SIS's leaders Kaprawi Norhayati in her analysis of the upsurge of Islamism observes that in Malaysia, as in other Muslim countries, Islamists are making women "the benchmark of its proof of success". As the government succumbed to the pressure of the Islamist movements, women found themselves at the "short end of the stick". SIS has adopted a strategy of re-reading Islamic texts, "demystifying" sharia and "illustrating the rich 'human interventions' ..., influenced by

⁷³ Fatima L. Adamu, "Politicisation of Gender and the Election of Muslim Women into Political Leadership in Hausa Society, Northern Nigeria" in, www.gwsafrica.org/

⁷⁴ FOMWAN is an umbrella organisation of many Muslim women's associations.

⁷⁵ Bilkisu Yusuf, "Women and empowerment in Islam" in, www.weeklytrust.com, 13 December, 2002, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Amina Waddud, *Qur'an and Woman: rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*, New York & Oxford, 1999, p. xii – xiii.

⁷⁷ Yusuf, 13 December, 2002, p. 7.

human reasoning and cultural contexts”.⁷⁸ The difference between BAOBAB and SIS on one hand and the many Muslim women’s movements in Nigeria is the latter groups’ denominational association. Both BAOBAB and SIS work across ethnic and/or religious boundaries to secure the interests of women in the public space. The Muslim women’s organisations in Nigeria, who are associated with the male-dominated NGOs on the other hand, seem restricted by the denominational association of the mother organisation. Many articles in IMN’s sisters’ forum and the academic forum for example show no indication of an attempt to conduct a reason-based debate.⁷⁹ When one compares these positions to those of SIS, or the intellectual debates about Islam, one cannot but agree with Yusuf of the poverty of ideas in Nigeria.

Other Muslim writers perceive biology as a justifiable basis for women’s exclusion from the political space. Doi, who taught in Zaria in the 1970s, makes this point. According to him a woman cannot head a state because, “there are complicated issues to be handled, both religious and political, ... [which] may be difficult for a woman to handle..., taking into consideration the strict code of modesty and conduct given by the religion of Islam and the biological make-up of a woman”.⁸⁰ Thus, women’s physiological and psychological make up are limitations to their sense of judgement.⁸¹ The inadequacy of the woman’ biology comes in many forms and is argued for wherever convenient by both sexes, among them, Ndagi. He equates being a woman to house and husband keeping, a point of view shared by many.⁸² Kabir’s argument seems to reveal the dilemma that besets the discourses of Islam and women in Nigeria. She condemns women’s movements that seek gender equality, the destruction of the class system and of patriarchy.⁸³ The dilemma is not exclusive to Nigeria, which would explain why Waddud was asked, “Why can’t we say we are working for gender justice from a human rights perspective” instead of our earlier claim of working from a gender-inclusive Islamic perspective”.⁸⁴ What the dilemma indicates is a need for women to adopt an exegetic engagement, extricating the spirit of the Qur’an from the imperfections of human word and agency, and locating their faith in their cultural histories. The process might have begun.⁸⁵

Conclusion:

The presence or absence of Nigerian women in general and of Muslim women in particular in the public space cannot be seen as a given or unchanging. The challenge is to analyse and/or explain why and how any particular dimension of the public space acquires significance at a point in time in the persistent reappraisals that form part of social discourses. What is done in this article is to address what the *hijab* signifies in the evolution of politics and the bureaucracy as dimensions of the public space. The *hijab* has a very short history in Nigeria.

⁷⁸ Kaprawi Norhayati, “The experiences of Sisters in Islam in facing the challenges of gender justices” a paper for , A World in Transition: New Challenges for Gender Justice at the Biannual (Gender and Development Network, Sweden) GADNET Conference in collaboration with Centre for Women’s Development Studies, India (CWDS)

⁷⁹ See, “Position of women in Islam” & “women in Islam” by Malama Maimuna Husseini; and “Islamic doctrines on women’s issues” and “Zahra” by Fatima Binta in, www.islamicmovement.org/sisters.htm,

⁸⁰ ‘Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Woman in Shari’ah (Islamic Law)*, London, 1994, p.136.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁸² Dr Muhammad Umaru Ndagi, “Which comes first: Your job or your husband?” in, www.dailytrust.com, 18 Nov.- 24 Nov., 2006. Also see, Rabi Sanusi, “The role of the Muslim woman in the 15th century of Hijra” in, Rahmatu Abdullahi (ed.), *The Muslim Woman: challenges of the 15th century of Hijra*”, Ilorin, 1988, p.82.

⁸³ Zainab Sa’id Kabir, “Women liberation movement: myths and realities” in, Rahmatu Abdullahi (ed.), 1988, p.130-131.

⁸⁴ Waddud, 2006, p. 191.

⁸⁵ Hajiya Bilkisu, “Political relevance of women in Islam” in, Weekly Trust, 3-9 August 2001, www.gamji.com.

Throughout the last half a century, the Muslim elite have always resorted to either Islam or sharia law as a rallying point for ethnic and male solidarity. Pitching their tent on the *hijab* is one of those points on which they hope to consolidate their alliance with the religious elite and male votes for their political ends. With respect to women's role in the public space, men have been resistant to an interpretation of the texts that will legitimise their presence in that space. This exclusion as I have argued in this text is a dimension of Nigerian politics and the international affiliations of religious groups. Wearing the *hijab* is a demand that can only be required of urban women, because of the nature and location of their work. It has never been demanded of women physical labourers that they should wear any kind of clothing that could hinder their work. This indicates the demand made on urban women is not merely about their presence in the public space in general, but about political power and the calculations and interests of elite groupings in that space. My contention is that the *hijab* symbolises a progression of the contestations of power whereby men seek to dictate the terms of women's role in politics and in the bureaucracy, since along with the *hijab* came a new rhetoric for women to be meek. The stakes have been raised since the introduction of civilian governance in 1999 whence women are being forced either by state governments or religious organisations into wearing it.

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