

MISS WORLD IN NIGERIA: EUROCENTRISM AND THE PROBLEM OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

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ABSTRACT

The article begins with a brief discussion of global feminism and the dangers for Western feminism of Eurocentrism, looking in detail at the example of Islamophobic modes of representation. It raises some of the key issues in this area, which include questions of universalism, women's human rights and respect for difference in the context of the legacies of colonialism. The article then moves on to look at the attempted staging of the Miss World pageant in Nigeria in 2002 in response to the success of the first Black African winner in 2001. It examines the contradictions in play and looks in some detail at western responses, focusing on one specific internet campaign and questions of Eurocentrism. It stresses the importance of voice for 'Third World' women, but also of access to being heard.

KEY WORDS: Global feminism, Eurocentrism, colonialism, women's rights, 'Third World' women, difference.

RESUMEN

Este artículo comienza con una breve discusión sobre el feminismo global y los peligros implícitos en el Eurocentrismo para el feminismo occidental, analizando detalladamente el ejemplo de formas de representación islamofóbicas. Se plantean algunas de las cuestiones clave dentro de esta área, que incluyen el universalismo, los derechos humanos de las mujeres y el respeto de la diferencia en el contexto de la herencia colonial. Después se examina el intento de celebrar el concurso de Miss Mundo en Nigeria en 2002 como respuesta al éxito que supuso la primera ganadora africana negra del concurso en 2001. Profundiza en las contradicciones y las respuestas occidentales, centrándose específicamente en una campaña de internet y en cuestiones de eurocentrismo. Enfatiza la importancia de la voz para las mujeres del Tercer Mundo, pero también de la capacidad de ser oídas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: feminismo global, eurocentrismo, colonialismo, derechos de las mujeres, mujeres del Tercer Mundo, diferencia.

Western feminism has long had global aspirations. From liberal feminist campaigns for women's human rights to radical feminist analyses of global patriarchy and calls for sisterhood, feminists have sought to extend their visions of libera-



tion to women everywhere.¹ The tendency to downplay differences between women has been an important strategy within Western feminism. Indeed much advance in the position of women in the West rested on discourses of sameness and human rights. From its inception in the early 1700s, feminism in the modern West has consistently held universalist aspirations and feminists have argued for women's rights as human beings. In radical feminism since the early 1970s, women as a group, sharing fundamental oppressions produced by global patriarchy, have been the basis on which feminists have sought to ground political action (though, here too, there has been increasing attention paid to differences between women over recent years).² With deep roots in discourses that have privileged the West as the most civilised, developed and most free part of the world, able to define standards to which all women should aspire, these feminist discourses have often been Eurocentric in their assumptions, perpetuating what Third World feminists have termed colonial modes of representation.³ In such discourse, Third World women become an undifferentiated collective other and in the process lose their specificity and voice. For example, in this type of Western feminist reading, the veil becomes a symbol of oppressive social relations governed by religion and tradition, rather than a cultural signifier that will mean different things in different societies and at different historical moments and may be chosen rather than imposed.⁴

Much current, widespread representation of Muslim individuals, societies and cultures conforms to what has in recent years been termed Islamophobia. In its 1997 report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, the Runnymede Trust, a British Charity concerned with race relations, argues that Islamophobic modes of representation are characterised by what it terms closed views of Islam. These include seeing Islam as:

A single monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to new realities.

As separate and other (a) not having any aims or values in common with other cultures (b) not affected by them (c) not influencing them.

Inferior to the West, barbaric, irrational, primitive, sexist.

Violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, engaged in a clash of civilisations.

A political ideology used for political or military advantage. (5)

A further sign of closed view is the total rejection of criticisms of the West made by Islam. The hostility on which contemporary Islamophobia is founded is not new to the West, but has a long history with roots going back at least as far as

¹ For a comprehensive account of different forms of feminism and a full bibliography see Chris Weedon.

² For more recent radical feminism see Diane Bell and Renate Klein.

³ See Chandra Talpade Mohanty (*Feminism*) and Uma Narayan.

⁴ For more on this see Jamal Badawi, Sajda Nazlee and Huda Khattab, and Mai Yamani.

the Crusades. Widespread negative media coverage of Islamic revolutions and Islamic states over the past few decades has served to reinforce many long established stereotypes. Where women are concerned, stereotypes include women as the repressed victims of an unchanging, patriarchal religion and culture, forced to conform to cultural practices that range from the repressive, for example, the veil, to the barbaric, as in the case of female genital mutilation.

Writing at the end of the 1970s, at the time of the Iranian hostage crisis, Edward Said undertook a detailed analysis of media representations of Islam, detailed in his book *Uncovering Islam* (1981). Said argued that:

In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the Islam in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam with its 800,000,000 people, its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia. (...) Yet there is a consensus on Islam as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, economic and social patterns. (x, xv)

He continued:

It is always the West and not Christianity, that seems pitted against Islam. Why? Because the assumption is that whereas the West is greater than and has surpassed the stage of Christianity, its principal religion, the world of Islam, its varied societies, histories and languages notwithstanding, is still mired in religion, primitivity, and backwardness. Therefore, the West is modern, greater than the sum of its parts, full of enriching contradictions and yet always Western in its cultural identity; the world of Islam, on the other hand, is no more than Islam, reducible to a small number of unchanging characteristics, despite the appearance of contradictions and experiences of variety that seem on the surface to be as plentiful as those of the West. (10)

In this article, I want to look at the issues of closed views of Islam in relation to feminism, taking the example of the controversies that accompanied the failed attempt to stage the Miss World Pageant in Nigeria in 2002 and the linked Western internet campaign against the sentencing to death of a young Nigerian mother under Sharia law.⁵ I am interested in what Western feminism might learn from these examples.

⁵ Sharia, literally meaning “the path to a watering hole”, denotes a religious code for living, derived from the teachings of the Koran and Sunna (the practice of the prophet Mohammed). It covers all aspects of life, from prayer, fasting and charity to dress codes. In some Islamic countries specific versions of Sharia Law have been formally adopted by the state as a formal legal system.

MISS WORLD IN NIGERIA

In 2001, the first ever Black African woman won the title of Miss World. Beauty contests have long been objects of feminist protest. For example, as early as 1968, women demonstrated against the Miss America Pageant, held that year in Atlantic City. Whereas for their supporters, beauty pageants signify the celebration of apparently natural norms of female beauty, norms that are actually particular and tend to privilege hegemonic European and North American ideals of white beauty and hybrids derived from them, for feminists they signify a capitalist exploitation of women's bodies that reduces women to sex objects in the interests of profit. There was a certain significance to a Black African woman, Agbani Darego, Miss Nigeria, finally winning the title in 2001. It marked a shift in what physical characteristics might be seen as universally beautiful. No one at that time, however, would have imagined its broader consequences.

Following usual conventions, Nigeria, the home country of the winning beauty queen, was invited to host the 2002 contest, and it was scheduled to take place in Abuja in November 2002. Contestants from all over the world were gathered there in the Hilton Hotel when a storm of protest broke out. There was rioting in Kaduna and Abuja, in which, according to Red Cross officials, 250 people were killed and 3,500 injured. The riots were the culmination of Muslim protests at the holding of Miss World in Nigeria and, in the rioting, Christians were the main focus of attack.

The riots were a direct response to an article in the Nigerian newspaper *This Day* by a young journalist, described as a fashion writer recently returned from training in Britain, Isioma Daniel. Her article, which referenced Muslim calls for the cancellation of the pageant, and suggested that the Prophet Mohammed would have approved of holding it in Nigeria, was regarded as blasphemous by many Nigerian Muslims. The Sharia court in the northern province of Zamfara State issued a fatwa against Ms Daniel and although the newspaper apologised for the article, its offices were vandalised and burnt down in the riots that followed.

Nigeria is both a developing country with a population of 120 million and a society split internally between three main ethnic groups and two major religions. The people are divided fairly equally into Christians and Muslims. The north is mainly Muslim and the south Christian, although significant minorities live in each region. Zamfara State in northern Nigeria was the first of twelve regions in the north to introduce Sharia law, and between its introduction in 2000 and the beauty pageant, two men and two women had been sentenced to death by stoning, though the sentences had not yet been carried out (Newswatch Online, 1. 12. 2002.) These sentences are illegal under federal Nigerian law. The planned staging of the Miss World pageant brought tensions that are rooted in Nigeria's internal conflicts violently into focus.

The riots led to the relocation of the Miss World contest to London. Yet the holding of the pageant in Nigeria was controversial long before the riots and not just among Nigerian Muslims. Christian leaders, too, had objected to it on moral grounds and in the West various voices were raised against Nigeria as a suit-



able location for the pageant for other reasons. From the late summer 2002 onwards, a number of Miss World contestants announced that they were boycotting the pageant in protest against the sentence of death by stoning, passed on an unmarried mother by a Sharia court in Zamfara State. On 6th September 2002, BBC News World Edition reported:

Miss World Nigeria Boycott spreads

Two more contestants in the Miss World contest to be held in Nigeria in November have announced that they are pulling out in protest at a Sharia death sentence passed on a woman convicted of adultery.

Miss France and Miss Belgium have joined a growing list of the world's beauty queens who have said that they will not be going to Nigeria.

Amina Lawal, 30, is due to be stoned to death after giving birth outside marriage. In August her appeal was rejected by a Sharia court.

Contestants from Denmark, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Norway and Togo have already announced that they will not go to Nigeria unless the death sentence on Ms Lawal is dropped.⁶

In this unlikely configuration we find beauty queens protesting on behalf of women's human rights, while for most feminists, beauty pageants are themselves violations of these rights, since they reduce women to sexualised bodily spectacles. This points to a fundamental problem in thinking about human rights: there are competing ideas of rights that do not conform to universalised standards, even among Western and Westernised women, let alone among the varied populations of women in the developing world.

The Miss World contest, once the target of feminist protests, had now become a focus of controversy from a range of different standpoints. It was a vehicle for raising issues of Nigerian Muslim and Christian beliefs and values, and the on-going conflicts between the different ethnic and religious groups within Nigeria. Moreover, it focused both Western and secular Nigerian critiques of the status and perceived legitimacy of Sharia law. Serious economic questions were also raised by the staging and last minute cancellation of a First World beauty contest in a developing country. Writing for Reuters on November 12th 2002, John Chiahemen reported that: "Pageant sources said organisers were battling to raise cash for everything from hotel rooms to air charters, including two jumbo jets that will fly equipment into a country with some of the world's poorest infrastructure". The stage to be used for the final in Abuja alone weighs 96 tonnes and must be flown in from London, a pageant official said: "Because Nigerian promoters were unable to pay all five million sterling (\$8 million) for hosting rights, they had to shoulder the 148 million naira (\$1.2 million) hotel costs at Abujas NICON". (REUTERS 12. 11. 2002).

⁶ BBC News, World Edition. 6.9. 2002

Newswatch Online reported that the government of Rivers state, home of Miss World 2001 and co-host of the pageant, lost about 500 million naira on logistics alone, and that the overall losses were around 10 billion naira (Newswatch Online 1. 12. 2002).

Within Nigeria, cultural and religious questions and conflicts, that also haunt post-colonial, multi-ethnic Western societies, take a sharper form. In large part an effect of the colonial process of drawing boundaries and constituting nations, the federal Nigerian state is secular, yet federal laws and values often conflict with those held by half the population, which is Muslim. Yet far from Islamophobic stereotypes, Nigerian Muslims were willing, before the publication of the article, to come to an accommodation over the contest. In an interview with Phillip Oladunjoye of Newswatch entitled “Let’s Never Have Miss World Here Again”, Lateef Adegbite, secretary-general of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs explained that:

The entire Muslim community of the country was against the staging of the contest in the first place. We think it is not a priority for the country. And, then, secondly, we feel that because of the form of the contest where people parade what they are supposed to modestly guard. You know, they just parade and in some cases in semi-nude action, which we feel is indecent and, of course, is against our religion. And we are concerned about the impact that such displays would have on the young ones. So, that was our general position because Islam has prescribed a way, particularly, of how women should guard their modesty. That is general. Then secondly, we felt that the timing was very wrong in the month of Ramadan. And it is the last 10 days of Ramadan, which is the holiest period for the Muslims in any year. Then, we led a protest publicly, well published, that the event should not come and that any event should not take place in the month of Ramadan. We also said the government facilities and government functionaries should not be involved in the exercise. Because anything that is considered unacceptable to a significant part of the population ought not to be financed with the government resources. And we published it. Then, of course the organisers, met us half-way and they continued with the contest but shifted the date of the grand finale, and, instead of November 30, shifted it to December 7. And they also made a concession in that the beauty queens would not appear semi-nude, they will appear in full dress or so. How that would have succeeded is a different matter. But then it appears that the Muslims were ready to live with the exercise until this irresponsible statement appeared in the *This Day* newspaper of 16th November blaspheming the person of the prophet, which is a very serious offence. And we protested and called for a retraction and an apology. And of course, some young people had moved to sack the office of *This Day* newspaper in Kaduna and that was the beginning of the problem.⁷

⁷ Interview with Lateef Adegbite, Secretary-general, Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. Newswatch, <www.allAfrica.com>

The image of Nigerian Muslims that this response implies is far removed from the common Western picture of inflexible and dogmatic fundamentalists.

The incidents surrounding the 2002 Miss World competition highlight the question of competing and conflicting values in a world increasingly polarised between secular and religious, Western and non-Western values, not only in the West itself, but also within developing countries, where discourses derived from Western modernity compete with indigenous discourses and practices and hybrids of the two. The staging of Miss World in Nigeria might be seen as another instance of globalisation, yet it is complex precisely because it involves struggles within Nigeria over the nature of the nation itself. It is the increasing globalisation of Western cultural forms, practices and values, often imported as elements of lifestyles without the economic base to support them, and frequently experienced as cultural imperialism, that, among other things, has fuelled hostile reactions in non-Western countries and among minorities in the West.

THE CASE OF AMINA LAWAL

At the centre of the boycott by contestants of the 2002 Miss World contest were Sharia Law and specifically the case of Amina Lawal. This was taken up in a Western internet campaign, part of which included the following widely circulated message:

Dear Friends,

I have just learned that the Nigerian supreme court has upheld the death sentence for Amina Lawal, who was condemned for the crime of adultery. She is to be buried up to her neck and stoned to death. Her death has been postponed for one month so that she can continue to nurse her baby. Amina's case is being handled by the Spanish branch of Amnesty International, which is attempting to put together enough signatures to make the Nigerian government rescind the death sentence. (A similar campaign saved another Nigerian woman, Safiya, condemned in similar circumstances.) The petition has so far (as of April 7th [2003]) amassed over 4,100,000 signatures. It will only take you a few seconds to sign Amnesty's online petition. Please sign the petition now, then forward this message to everyone in your address book.

On 2 May 2003, another e-mail was circulated entitled "Please Stop the International Amina Lawal Protest Letter Campaigns". It read as follows:

Dear friends,

There has been a whole host of petitions and letter writing campaigns about Amina Lawal (sentenced to stoning to death for adultery in August 2002). Many of these are inaccurate and ineffective and may even be damaging to her case and those of others in similar situations. The information currently circulated is inaccurate, and the situation in Nigeria, being volatile, will not be helped by such campaigns. At the end of this letter, we indicate ways in which you can help us and we hope we can count on your continuing support.

The second e-mail was signed by Ayesha Imam (Board Member) and Sindi Medar-Gould (Executive Director) of the Nigerian organisation BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, and in it they sought to clarify at some length the facts of the case, many of which had been badly misrepresented in the internet campaign. Among the worst errors was the misrepresentation of the state of the appeal and of the judicial system.⁸ This, they pointed out, undermined the credibility of those people working on the ground on Amina Lawal's behalf in Nigeria. The Western campaign organisers had assumed, without asking relevant groups in Nigeria, that international internet petitions could do more to help Amina Lawal than Nigerian NGOs. Imam and Medar-Gould pointed out that that this was very far from the case:

Not one appeal taken up by BAOBAB and supporting local NGOs in Nigeria had been lost to date. They had been won in local state Sharia courts; none had needed to go up to the Federal Sharia Court of Appeal, from whence appeals would go to the Supreme Court. Contrary to the statements in many of the internationally originated appeals for petitions and protest letters, none of the victims received a pardon as a result of international pressure.

Moreover, one extremely serious consequence of the internet campaign was the likelihood that it would provoke vigilante and political further (over)reaction to international attempts at pressure. Imam and Medar-Gould pointed out that:

This has happened already in the case of Bariya Magazu, the unmarried teenager convicted of zina (extra-marital sex) and sentenced to flogging in Zamfara in 1999. Ms. Magazu's sentence was quite illegally brought forward with no notice, despite the earlier assurances of the trial judge that the sentence would not be carried out for at least a year. She was told the night before that it would be carried out very early the next morning (and thus had no way of contacting anyone for help even if this unschooled and poor rural teenager had access to a telephone or organizing knowledge and experience), whilst the state bureaucracy had been instructed to obstruct and was physically refusing to take the appeal papers from BAOBAB's lawyers. The extra-legal carrying out of the sentence was not despite national and international pressure; it was deliberately to defy it. The Governor of Zamfara State boasted of his resistance to these letters from infidels even to sniggering over how many letters he had received.

⁸ BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights has been closely involved with defending the rights of women, men and children in Muslim, customary and secular laws and in particular of those convicted under the Sharia Criminal legislation acts in operation in Nigeria since 2000. BAOBAB was the first (and for several months the only) NGO with members from the Muslim community, who were willing to speak publicly against retrogressive versions of Muslim laws and to work on changing the dominant conservative understanding of the rights of women in enacted Sharia (Muslim religious laws), as well as in customary and secular laws. BAOBAB identifies victims and supports their appeals, raising funds for the costs, putting together a strategy team of women's and human rights activists, lawyers and Islamic scholars who contribute their expertise and time voluntarily.

The Lawal internet campaign betrayed many of the features that postcolonial feminist critics have identified as typifying colonialist modes of thinking and representation. It implicitly assumed that Western modes of protest were the most successful and appropriate, irrespective of local circumstances in Nigeria and of the views of those working on the ground, which in any case were not sought. Moreover, in their lack of attention to the details of the situation and to the relevant struggles going on within Nigeria, they perpetuated negative stereotyping of Islam and of Africa as the barbaric and savage Other. Imam and Medar-Gould asked recipients of the e-mail not to endorse this:

Accepting stereotypes that present Islam as incompatible with human rights not only perpetuates racism but also confirms the claims of right-wing politico-religious extremists in all of our contexts. When protest letters re-present negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, they inflame sentiments rather than encouraging reflection and strengthening local progressive movements.

This othering of Islam by the West creates monolithic images, which suggest that unlike other religions, it is purely oppressive. Imam and Medar-Gould point out that this is far from the case. Like other belief systems and ideologies:

Muslim discourses and the invocation of Islam have been used both to vindicate and protect women's rights in some places and times, and to violate and restrict them in other places and times as in the present case. The same can be said of many, many other religions and discourses (for example, Christianity, capitalism, socialism, modernization to name but a few).

At stake in these Islamophobic, colonialist modes of representation is a failure to consider who is invoking Islam and why, and also a failure to acknowledge and support internal dissent within Nigeria. This form of Western discourses involves a wholesale and inaccurate condemnation of people's beliefs and cultures, and is likely to hinder rather than help any change views in Nigeria. As Imam and Medar-Gould suggest, its effects are rather to promote fundamentalist forms of identity. They call for forms of international support that respect the analyses and agency of those activists most closely involved and in touch with the issues on the ground and the wishes of the women and men directly suffering rights violations. They further comment that: "There is an unbecoming arrogance in assuming that international human rights organisations or others always know better than those directly involved, and therefore can take actions that fly in the face of their express wishes." Imam and Medar-Gould inform their readers, that contrary to Western accounts of the problem, women's rights activists working on these issues very early on received support from progressive lawyers, Islamic scholars and rights activists from throughout Nigeria, the Muslim world and elsewhere, in the form of legal and religious argumentation (fiqh), case law examples and strategies which were generously shared. Amina Lawal's appeal was indeed successful in the Sharia Court of Appeal in September 2003.

The assumptions underpinning the internet campaign (attributed to the Spanish Branch of Amnesty International), displayed many of the features that



Edward Said identified in his book, *Covering Islam*, and that Third World feminists have repeatedly criticised. They deny complexity, diversity and change to Islamic societies and perpetuate the binaries that govern Western discourses about Islam and do not allow Muslim women and men or nations to be diverse or democratic and modern.

CONCLUSIONS

What can Western feminists learn from these examples? The first point must be the importance of both soliciting and listening to the voices and views of Third World women. The events that I have described in relation to Nigeria serve to highlight the failure of feminists and other human rights activists in the West to take on board Third World critiques of Eurocentrism. It is clear that human rights are both crucially important and complex issues and cannot only be thought in terms of Western ethnocentric understandings and assumptions. Such assumptions can be found not only in political rhetoric of Western leaders,⁹ but in the discourse and practice of Western feminists and human rights organisations. While we do not, as feminists, have to subscribe to a cultural relativism that implicitly endorses repressive practices towards women, how we understand, represent and contest such practices matters profoundly. Writing, for example, of female genital mutilation in the Sudan, Evelyne Accad argues that the reality is far from that described in many Western feminist accounts of the practice. It is not meekly accepted by a passive, tradition and religion bound community of women:

⁹ For a recent example see the introduction to the National Security Strategy of the United States of America published in September 2002. One year after 9/11, George W. Bush stated the following: "The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom, democracy and free enterprise. In the twenty-first century, only nations that share a commitment to protecting basic human rights and guaranteeing political and economic freedom will be able to unleash the potential of their people and assure their future prosperity. People everywhere want to be able to speak freely; choose who will govern them; worship as they please; educate their children male and female; own property; and enjoy the benefits of their labor. These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages." <<http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/secstrat.html>> In this statement, Bush characterises the twentieth century in terms of struggles between liberty and totalitarianism in which American values proved to be the only sustainable model for success. For Bush and the American administration as a whole, there can only be one morality, just as there is only one way of reading the history of the Twentieth Century. Thus, for example, in the National Security Strategy, George W. Bush asserts: "Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities" President Bush West Point, New York June 1, 2002. <<http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/secstrat.html>>

Women who have been subjected to circumcision or who had witnessed the worst form of excision infibulation done on relatives or friends, not only voiced their opinion against it, but they are involved in a wide campaign and actions aimed at struggling to eradicate the practice. The struggle they described to me seemed quite remarkable. They go to the countryside with programs of hygiene and development. They explain the connection between diseases and infibulation, which the people have no effort in making. They stage plays and have radio programs to teach the people about the disastrous consequences linked to the practice, and they also educate the midwives and lead them to other means of earning a living than performing these operations. (465-9)

This is a very different picture of Third World women's relation to female genital mutilation than that found in the work of Western feminists, for example, Mary Daly's classic radical feminist text *Gyn/Ecology* (1979).

The emphasizing of a common shared humanity remains a crucial political strategy within feminism and a movement which began by representing the interests of white, Western, middle-class, women has diversified to the point where human rights have been placed at the centre of the agenda for a global feminism. Yet this global feminism must of necessity pay rigorous attention to diversity, specificity and location. If Western women, as one part of a strategic global feminism, do not pay attention to the voices, views and understanding of non-Western women, we will find that our implicit endorsement of the Eurocentric claim that Western perspectives and values are universally valid, and that Third World women are passive victims, will continue to serve as an ideological underpinning for hegemony, imperialism and negative attitudes to non-Western cultures.



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