

Islam, Politics and Women's Rights

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From 1950 to 1966, politics in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim Northern Region were dominated by the conflict between the conservative Northern People's Congress (NPC) and the progressive Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU). The NPC sought to preserve the authoritative *status quo* of the region by protecting the power of the *Masu Sarauta* (Possessors of Governance) — titled officials whose hereditary positions had their origins in the Sokoto Caliphate founded by Usman dan Fodio in the early 1800s. Most leaders of the NPC were themselves members of the *Masu Sarauta*. Quite to the contrary, NEPU leaders represented a young intelligentsia who called for a radical reorganization of power in the North. They stated that the *Masu Sarauta* represented an entrenched elite who oppressed the *Talakawa* (common people). The NEPU called for political power to be held only by elected officials, and the *Masu Sarauta* to be reduced to purely ceremonial duties. Despite their very different political perspectives and goals, both parties drew upon Islam as a key means of legitimizing their party platforms and programs. To this end, the parties developed interpretations of religious texts, constructed images of the region's religious history and utilized Islamic institutions in ways that supported their own particular political objectives.

Perhaps no particular area of conflict brought the parties' ideological differences into such sharp contrast as did the question of women's political rights and roles. Although the debate was most vehement on the issue of whether women should be granted political rights such as suffrage and the holding of political office, it expanded to involve women's wider social roles and their status within society. Not surprisingly, the conservative NPC resisted the granting of real political rights to women and called for the maintenance of women's "traditional" roles. In contrast, NEPU declared that the time had come in Northern Nigeria for women to be freed of traditional roles in order to take up new (political) responsibilities.

Although this conflict dealt with a contemporary political question, the debate itself was carried out almost completely in terms of Islamic ideology. The NPC maintained that Islam forbade women from taking part in most aspects of politics, while NEPU claimed that Islam allowed them a variety of political roles. In the course of this article, several questions will be addressed. First, what roles did women

play in each of the political parties? What was each party's stand on women's suffrage and on such topics as women holding office? How was each stand justified in terms of Islamic ideology? What were the implications of each stand in terms of women's wider position within society? How did the debate reflect and influence the construction of women's "traditional" roles? To answer these questions, this article will undertake an examination of women's participation in various political activities during the period in question, as well as examine each party's stands on the issue of women's political rights during this time. Answering these questions will improve our knowledge of both popular (largely male) attitudes towards women's political rights and women's own perspectives on political and social issues during this period. Further, this study adds a much needed historical dimension to the literature on women's issues in Northern Nigeria.

The Setting: Women's Political Roles

Although the issue of women's political rights did not come to the forefront of political debate in the region until around 1956, both parties had established "women's wings" by the early years of the decade. The structure and activities of these organizations were very telling of the parties' coming stands on women's political rights. NEPU was the first party to involve women in the political process, with its women's wing being opened in Kano in 1953.¹ Even as early as 1951 a woman by the name of Gambo Sawaba was giving lectures at NEPU rallies in the city of Zaria, in part because she was fluent in Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba and Nupe. Even when not lecturing, she would frequently serve as an interpreter for other speakers.² The fact that NEPU gave such a prominent role to women in party activities helped draw other women into the political process. Because of the practice of *kulle* (purdah or wife seclusion), many women in the region could not attend such political rallies. Early female members of NEPU sought to overcome this barrier by moving from house to house in the region around Zaria and other cities to speak to secluded women.³

Such activities helped NEPU recruit female political activists in numbers great enough to warrant the formation of a NEPU women's wing within a couple of years of the party's founding. Alhaji Tanko Yakasai, an early NEPU organizer, states that wherever there was a NEPU branch, there was also a women's wing, which had its own comple-

ment of leadership. The women members elected their own Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, etc. Each of these groups then elected representatives to the National women's wing.⁴ In general, the women attracted to NEPU were young. Hajiya Jumai Wool, one of the first members of the NEPU women's wing in Kano reports that there were no members in her group over the age of thirty.⁵ Many of the more promising members of the women's wing were schooled, in practical as well as political subjects, at the party's newspaper office in Zaria, where the *Daily Comet* newspaper was produced.⁶ This practice was also indicative of NEPU's wider stance in favor of female education.

Largely because of their resistance to the idea of women taking active political roles, the NPC did not follow the NEPU's lead in actively seeking to recruit women into the party. Still, the leadership of the NPC recognized that NEPU was attracting the sympathy of a number of the region's women. As such, the party formed its own women's wing, complete with local branches. For the most part the membership of this wing was made up of relations and associates of the party's leaders. For example, in Kano, one of the leaders of the NPC women's wing was Ladi Kara, a "slave" of the Emir.⁷ Another informant reports that the general procedure of the NPC was to appoint prominent local women as heads of the various branches of the women's wing, but that actual meetings among the wing's members were rare.⁸ A 1957 newspaper article stated that the women's wing of the NPC in Maiduguri had collapsed when its membership fell to only two.⁹

As a result of the party's conservative stand towards women, members of the NPC's women's wings were not to be found lecturing at rallies or canvassing support from house to house. The NPC's lackluster support for any kind of women's organization lasted through to the end of the First Republic. In 1963, the Sardauna of Sokoto was contacted by the *Jamiyar Matan Arewa* (Northern Women's Congress), a group of 60 women who sought to "bring together all women in the North in order to teach the reading and writing of English and general domestic science," and who made a point in forswearing any interest in politics. Despite these none-too-radical goals, the Sardauna agreed to patronage of their group only after they had sent repeated letters. Even so, a private note to his secretary stated that he did so "with reluctance."¹⁰

It should be noted that membership in women's wings was not the only role played by women during the period. Women were a common fixture at political rallies for both parties, though the relationship between the parties and the women varied considerably. The mere presence of a number of women could help attract spectators to a political rally. As one NEPU supporter stated "we sang and danced and clapped our hands — since we were young everyone was interested when we sang for NEPU."¹¹ The fact that the presence of young women tended to attract young men was not lost upon the leaders of the political parties. Though the activity seems to have been pioneered by NEPU, both parties made use of *goge* dancing to attract potential party

converts and raise funds. These dances, which centered around the *goge*, a single-stringed bowed instrument, were popular during the 1950s and 1960s. The parties sponsored concerts and charged admission. Hajiya Jumai stated that before the NPC copied the practice, they at first complained, because young male NPC supporters were being drawn to the NEPU events when "they saw the young women dancing and having fun."¹² This information was corroborated by Tanko Yakasai, who said "we used the *goge* dance to mobilize and recruit, and the younger elements of the women actually assisted in this work."¹³

The relationship between women and politics was not always as simple as having women act as a lure for potential male party members, for the parties often hired or coerced prostitutes to serve their supporters' sexual needs. Renee Pitten's research revealed that the NPC had an officer known as the "party manager," whose duty it was to see that prostitutes "complied with party directives." Further, it was his job to see to the women's transport, food and accommodation during political tours. Pitten goes on to state:

Almost all the *karuwai* [prostitutes] were involved in the political campaigns (there was little choice), and the campaigns were in support of the NPC. Women who supported other political parties, such as NEPU or NCNC, were usually induced to change their alliances or move elsewhere. The party provided tangible support for the *karuwai*, although periodically it would express condemnation of the women, and withhold the largess the women had come to expect, and for which they worked. There was generally an understanding between the *karuwai* and the NPC organizers that if the *karuwai* cooperated with the Party, the Party would show its appreciation in terms of financial support and positive social sanctions. It was an article of faith of the time that "*siyasa sai da mace*" (Politics cannot exist without women).¹⁴

It is important at this point to examine just exactly what is implied by the term "*karuwai*." The most common translation for this word is indeed "prostitute" as utilized by Pitten above, but it is also frequently applied to women who chose to live outside the strictures of Hausa tradition regarding women. Hence, women who attended party rallies or *goge* dances were almost certainly regarded as *karuwai*. As one newspaper editorial commented: "If one visited any public political meetings, he would see no respectable female, neither the wives of the NEPU or NPC leaders. He would see only *karuwai*."¹⁵ Such a designation, though, does not necessarily mean that all the women in question were exchanging sex for money or had been coerced to serve the party in such a capacity. Certainly some women did find themselves in such a situation, while others, simply by taking part in politics, found themselves characterized as "*karuwai*". Thus, the very act of seeking inclusion within the political process placed women outside the socially constructed bounds of "respectability" — as no better than prostitutes.

The ambiguity between women who were indeed prostitutes and those who sought to break out of traditional roles worked to the advantage of the NPC. Anti-prostitution sweeps of entire towns were common during the 1950s and 1960s. These actions were frequently declared as moves to “restore morality” and stop “anti-Islamic activities.”¹⁶ Such occasions were a prime opportunity for the authorities (who almost always supported the NPC) to settle scores against those who supported their opponents. Editorials in the NEPU *Daily Comet* complained that, while they, of course, supported the idea of anti-prostitution campaigns, it seemed that only those prostitutes who supported NEPU were being arrested.¹⁷ Indeed, all female members of NEPU were threatened by such campaigns. As one NEPU member stated: “They arrested the NEPU women and the prostitutes and every woman in NEPU was called a prostitute. If you were arrested they might imprison you for up to three years.”¹⁸ Such risks seem to have been very real. Hajiya Jumai Wool stated that she was arrested for the first time when she was fifteen.¹⁹ Hajiya Gambo Sawaba alleged in 1958 that the 40 women present at the first meeting of the NEPU women’s wing in Kano were all arrested and imprisoned for one month each.²⁰ On the occasion of one NEPU rally in Katsina which coincided with an anti-prostitution campaign, the NEPU women’s wing had to travel hidden under tarps in the back of a truck, for fear that they would be arrested by the Native Authority police.²¹

Clearly, there were extensive barriers to women’s political participation in northern Nigeria. Women who sought to break out of social boundaries such as *kulle* and overcome barriers to the acquisition of education were faced with constant repression, as mentioned above, and even threat to life and limb. Gambo Sawaba’s biography includes several instances of beatings and assaults, all attributed to the NPC’s *Yan Mahaukita*.²² One such attack represented a clear attempt at murder where she was left for dead in the bush, to be found several days later. For those women who did participate in the political process, particularly on the side of NEPU, it is obvious that they were willing to take great risks for what they saw as right.

The Editorial Debate: “The Position of Women in Islam”

Up to late 1956, the conflict over women’s political roles was one of actions. The members of NEPU’s women’s wings pushed the limits of women’s accepted political roles simply by taking an active part in political activities. The NPC effectively showed its disapproval by harassing these women by way of the party’s control over the courts and police.

The announcement of a Constitutional Conference to be held in London in 1957 brought a new aspect to the conflict over women’s political rights and roles. The Constitutional Conference provided an opportunity for parties in opposition to the NPC (not only NEPU but also the Western Region based Action Group and Eastern Region based National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons) to push for women’s suffrage in the North before an international audi-

ence. The NPC leaders at the conference followed a staunch party line which stated that female suffrage was simply un-Islamic. When interviewed by the BBC (in London) and asked why his party resisted women’s suffrage, the Sar-dauna simply replied “Because of our religion.” This comment was given front-page treatment by several northern Nigerian newspapers. In support of the Sar-dauna’s position, the President of the NPC branch in Jos, Alhaji Audu, stated: “It is unthinkable for anybody to suggest that overnight the sacred traditions of the Northern Region should be abandoned.”²³

The comments of the Sar-dauna in London, though, were an extreme distillation of a debate which had already raged for several months in 1956 and early 1957. This debate had shifted the conflict over women’s political rights away from one of actions (though this factor continued) and towards a public, ideological argument over the Islamic basis of women’s political rights. During this period, speeches and editorials on women’s political rights became a central focus of each party’s activities.

The debate was opened when one Isa Wali wrote an eight-part editorial for the newspaper *Gaskiya* entitled “Makamin Mata a Musulunci” (The Position of Women in Islam). The articles dealt with all aspects of women’s political and social rights. Wali’s assertions were quite radical in the context of the northern Nigerian community. In summary, Wali stated that according to Islam, women and men were equal in almost all respects — most particularly in respect to political, social, and educational rights. The fact that women in Northern Nigeria were denied these rights was not because of Islam, which Wali defined as progressive, but rather because of the conservatism of local culture — which was wrongly interpreted as Islamic in origin.

Wali’s assertions created such a stir that every single issue of *Gaskiya* for the next four months featured replies either rebutting or supporting his writings.²⁴ It was not uncommon for several replies to be published in each issue.²⁵

It is important to note that Wali was a closet NEPU supporter. But, because he worked for the Northern Region government, he chose to maintain a guise of political neutrality. Still, his extensive editorials were the equivalent of a NEPU platform on Women’s rights. Wali’s political tendencies were certainly not overlooked by the newspaper’s readership. Witness an early rebuttal by an NPC supporter.

All what Malam Isa is saying is in line with the manifesto of the NEPU party — women’s liberation. He should come out and tell us that he is now a propagandist of the NEPU party.²⁶

Indeed, Wali’s argument that Islam did allow (and even encouraged) women to take political roles was a direct challenge to the NPC’s stand against women’s political and social rights.

We want the female population of this great country to get their rightful place as permitted by Islamic law and as practiced in other Muslim nations. Our female population must be given all their rights. In fact, they

are treated little better than in pre-Islamic Arabia. They remain illiterate and work like slaves.²⁷

The comment comparing the region to pre-Islamic Arabia served as a subtle attack on the NPC's vision of Islam, which NEPU sought to identify as so reactionary that it drew upon pre-Islamic customs rather than the proper laws of Islam as introduced by the Prophet. In effect, NEPU was stating that the "traditional" role of women as defended by the NPC was not Islamic at all, but a hold-over from the region's pre-Islamic past. According to Wali, it was not the religion of Islam that called for restrictions on women's rights, but rather the local (and pre-Islamic) traditions of Northern Nigeria.

My intention is to bring out clearly the real meanings of the Qur'an, as opposed to the meanings given by our local Muslim Scholars. Another objective is to show clearly the difference between what is compulsory in Islam and what elements of our local heritage are passed off as Islamic injunctions.²⁸

One of Wali's primary goals was to show that true Islam was not averse to women taking part in politics. He noted that the Prophet's fourth wife, Aisha, led a rebellion against the fourth Caliph, Ali. Further, he stated:

Nobody challenged the action of Aisha in leading a rebellious group against Ali. Her leadership role came out clearly. So you can see that if a woman, the wife of our Holy Prophet, could lead a war party, there is no leadership role which a woman could not hold. Throughout Muslim history, especially during the Abbasid period, females enjoyed esteemed public positions. One must see how women were so numerous in any field of human endeavor.²⁹

In a later installment, Wali pointed out that the wives of the Prophet's companions were known to be wise and devout Muslims.

Even among the companions of the Prophet, there were wives who were more clever than their husbands. For example, the wife of Saud ibn Musayyab was more knowledgeable and intelligent than her husband.³⁰

While Wali conceded that physical conditions such as pregnancy might disqualify a woman from holding "the highest positions of government" (a reply to a common NPC argument that pregnancy prevented women from holding government offices), other positions, such as that of *alkali* (judge), or holding positions in local and regional councils, were certainly open to them.³¹

Also central to Wali's argument was the fact that other Muslim states did not restrict women's political activity as did the Northern Region of Nigeria. Countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Syria, Turkey, and Malaysia were cited as examples of states where women could vote and hold office even though the population of these countries was largely Muslim. Wali went so far as to cite specific examples of women from these countries who held high political positions, such as Begum Shah Nawaz, the Pakistani Ambassador to the United States or Mrs. Makbul Dibia, a Turkish

Minister of Parliament.³² Such examples were given to show that Islam was indeed a progressive political force, and that only in the eyes of the NPC was it incapable of dealing with the demands of a modern world.

It is the duty of the entire Muslim community of this great nation of ours to work hard and bring out clearly the true meaning of Islam. They should separate truth from falsehood or mere culture, as people are doing in other Muslim countries.³³

Wali's articles were not limited only to political matters. He expanded his argument to include such issues as women's mobility, right to education, and men's right to take more than one wife and to keep concubines under Islamic law. In so doing, Wali was attacking the real root of the conservative position regarding the exclusion of women from politics — their inferior social status.

Wali also dealt directly with the issue of whether social restrictions such as *kulle*, and the nature of women's proper education should limit women's ability to take part in political activities. Echoing a common NEPU theme, Wali attacked the idea that wife seclusion was considered mandatory for all Muslims. Rather, he maintained that as long as a woman behaved modestly and was properly dressed, she was free to go about as she wished. Repeating his theme that Northern Nigeria was governed by local, rather than Islamic, tradition, Wali pointed out that other Muslim nations did not so restrict women's freedom of movement.³⁴

Nowhere in the whole Qur'an and the Hadiths is there clear indication that we should isolate our female population as we are doing in Northern Nigeria. Certainly the verses are misunderstood by our Nigerian *Ulama*. What is required is to keep themselves covered when they are to go out.³⁵

Wali even questioned the relevance of the action of the Prophet in secluding his wives — the fact that Mohammad had "secluded" his wives being a central argument of those who supported the contemporary practice in Nigeria. The passage of the Qur'an which deals with this topic, Wali maintained, was clearly addressed *only* to the wives of the Prophet, and was a result of Mohammad's desire to protect himself from those who sought to gain influence over or attack him through his wives. Hence, stated Wali, in this case the actions of the Prophet were relevant only to his own (very unique) situation, and were not to be emulated by his followers.³⁶

The issue of *kulle* was of particular interest to many of the region's women, since it did not only limit women's general mobility, but in many cases also led to a restriction on women's economic activities and even access to medical care. On this latter issue, Hajija Jumai Wool stated:

Malam Aminu said women could go to the hospital if they were pregnant, but they [the NPC] said this was contrary to Islam. Women should stay at home and use traditional medicines. The NPC members used the Hospital for themselves.³⁷

As for education, NEPU had long maintained that there

should be no distinction between male and female education as dictated by the Qur'an. This was a policy that NEPU acted on directly in the Islamiyya schools which they founded throughout northern Nigeria. There was a well-known event in Kano when Aminu Kano publicly presented a seven-year-old girl who had memorized the entire Qur'an — as a means of showing the effectiveness of the Islamiyya school's blending of Western and Islamic educational techniques. This event was designed not only to highlight the school, but also the intellectual potential of females. Echoing the NEPU support for women's education, Wali stated that Islam called for women to be educated equally to men — in all areas of scholarship.

It is compulsory in Islam for women to be educated. There is no question about it. There is no difference in the form of education between male and female.³⁸

Showing little fear, Wali even went so far as to call into question the practice of polygamy in Islam. While he recognized that the Qur'an did state that up to four wives were allowed, he argued that the restrictions placed on this practice, particularly the Quranic injunction to treat all wives equally, made the institution of polygamy beyond the reach of all but the most extraordinary men (such as the Prophet himself).³⁹ In support of this fact, he cited that the Third Caliph had only one wife.⁴⁰

As stated previously, the most basic argument advanced by the NPC was simply that Islam prohibited political activity by women. In their replies to Isa Wali, NPC supporters made their arguments in more specific terms. One Hadith cited in support of the NPC's stand was "People will rarely triumph if a woman is assigned as leader."⁴¹ The logical extension, claimed members of the NPC, was that if you could not have female leaders, you could not give women the vote, since in a democracy, the voters are the true leaders.⁴² Alhaji Abubakar, Dokajin Kano,⁴³ requested that Wali "check his sources" regarding his statement that women had similar rights to positions of leadership to men, and pointed out that there were not "female heads of state" during the period of the Rashidun. He went on to say:

There are simply duties and functions which Islam clearly forbids to women from pursuing. Things such as political leadership, judging court, leading prayers and others. Any society that gives such functions to women is not an Islamic society.⁴⁴

Along a similar line, another writer attacked Wali's claim that other Islamic states were granting political positions to women.

I wish to draw the attention of Malam Isa Wali to the fact that we do not want our government to copy what is done in Persia, Tunisia or Egypt. They are following the example of Western Culture. We are Muslims. Our culture is Islamic.⁴⁵

During an interview in 1993, Nasiru Kabara recalled the debate, and attacked Malam Wali by stating that he never showed textual evidence that Islam supported women in positions of authority.

But he could not show a line in the tradition of the Prophet. He and his supporters could not show one single tradition which shows that women can do this. It is just foolishness and ignorance to say otherwise.⁴⁶

The NPC, though, did not rely solely upon their argument that Islam prohibited political activity by women specifically. Rather, the most common argument put forward by the NPC supporters was that it was Islam's restrictions on women's social rights and roles that necessitated women's exclusion from the political realm — *kulle* in particular, but also issues of education.

Several writers attacked Wali's assertion that *kulle* was not supported by Islamic ideology. Alhaji Durumin Iya, an NPC member and stalwart from Kaduna, stated that voting, for example, would require that women leave their homes. Such an activity would be a violation of *kulle*, and would necessitate that women "mixed freely with men." Both of these actions, he maintained, ran contrary to Islamic injunction. Malam Iya cited two hadiths to support his case: "Muslims should not allow their wives to come out of their houses, because if a woman leaves her house, *Shaidan* (Satan) will certainly beautify her structure and many men would be attracted to her," and "There is nowhere that it is lawful for both male and female to mix together."⁴⁷ In closing his commentary, Malam Iya attacked Wali's knowledge of Islam by stating:

The above quoted hadith clearly exposes the shallowness of the Islamic knowledge of the one who said there is no single hadith to support *kulle* in Islam.⁴⁸

In a very interesting rebuttal to Wali's claims that *kulle* was unIslamic, one Musa Bojude stated:

In our society our greatest Caliph was the famous Shehu Uthman dan Fodio. We know that he kept his wives in his house. We also know that the Shehu was *Sheiku Kutab* — that he communicated with the Prophet on a daily basis while he lived among us. If keeping women in houses is wrong the Prophet would have directed Uthman dan Fodio to stop doing so.⁴⁹

Some individuals took an even more extreme line than those scholars quoted above. Malams Awwad and Sha'abon, Hausas living in the Gold Coast, were so moved by the issue that they wrote from abroad to cite a Hadith from the book *Ibn Adi Aid Anas* which they cited as follows: "A woman is allowed out of her matrimonial home on two occasions — when she is being taken to that house and when she dies."⁵⁰ Others stated that it was permissible for some women to go outside of their homes, but only if they were old and ugly, and even they must be modestly clothed.⁵¹

Not all of the NPC's arguments in favor of *Kulle* and against female suffrage and political activity were so grounded in religious ideology. In addition to his ideological arguments in favor of *kulle*, Alhaji Salihi Durimin Iya also put forward an esthetic argument.

I wish to draw the attention of M. Isa Wali to the fact that women who are put "behind bars" — in *kulle* —

are softer and more lovely. That is why people wish to see them. They are true females. Those not under *kulle* have lost all their feminine characteristics, they regard themselves as equal to men and Allah makes them coarse and unattractive.⁵²

Another writer stated that women should not hold political office simply because of their character.

Women should not hold public office because they can be easily deceived or cheated. Their hearts are weak. They are sympathetic and can be quickly governed by emotion rather than reason.⁵³

The issue of women's education was also frequently cited as a reason for denying women political rights. In the words of one writer:

It must not be forgotten that the population of women in the Region exceeds that of men, and about 99% of the women are not only illiterate, but are uninformed and uneducated in every way. Women's franchise at this stage and under such appalling circumstances merely means putting the destiny of the country into the hands of an illiterate, uninformed and uneducated public — you can imagine how disastrous that would be. That would be democracy indeed!⁵⁴

Such commentary as this was, of course, made with disregard for the fact the male population of the North was itself largely uneducated. Further, the Native Authorities (largely staffed by NPC supporters) had consistently resisted the idea of female education in the Northern Region for much of the 20th century, a situation frequently lamented by the British colonial government in the region (at least during the earlier period of colonial rule).⁵⁵ While the NPC was not necessarily opposed to the idea of education for women, they did have very particular ideas about what sort of education was suitable. In an article entitled "Appeal to Women," the Sultan of Sokoto called upon women to

wake up and be prepared to march in line with their menfolk [because] as future mothers they should learn how to be clean and keep their homes in order.⁵⁶

In a similar vein, the Sardauna of Sokoto stated "no country can develop properly without good housewives, teachers, nurses, and other occupations that require the services of women."⁵⁷

Several writers, though, directly rebutted Wali's claims that women could and should be educated equally to men.

The quest for knowledge for a woman is compulsory provided there is no danger of breaking the laws of Allah in seeking that knowledge — that is, like the mixing of men and women in the name of education. If females can be educated without mixing with the opposite sex, then all is well and good.⁵⁸

and

Getting education is compulsory for both male and female in the Islamic religion. However, the sort of education is that which would allow women to perform domestic duties properly — cooking, cleaning, chil-

draising, etc. Education for other duties is, I fear, unIslamic.⁵⁹

Hence, the logic for the more conservatively-minded members of the northern populace was clear. It was basically a good thing for women to be educated, but only when it did not require mixing with men and only in a fashion that facilitated their role as mothers and housekeepers. Wider education was not suitable for women, and without this education they were not qualified to vote.

As previously noted, the NEPU leadership staunchly advocated women's education. In response to the above-quoted editorials one Audu Danladi lamented the absence of a women's voice in the ongoing debate over women's rights.

No woman has responded to the writings of Isa Wali, either for or against. This is a very serious matter. People just go ahead and discuss the affairs of those who cannot defend themselves. This is very unfair as far as I am concerned. It seems there are two reasons for why our female population have refused to comment on such a matter that affects them so directly. The first and most important is ignorance. How many women can read or respond to these debates? How many even know about the articles? The second reason is fear — fear of the sort of condemnations that have been leveled against Isa Wali for telling the truth. We are cheating our female population by not sending them to school. We allow them to live in ignorance.⁶⁰

Indeed, the absence of involvement by members of NEPU's women's wing is puzzling, since several of these women, such as Gambo Sawaba, were literate and were certainly not known for their fear of reprisals. Whether they were involved in the phrasing of Wali's initial editorials, or in the later debate is not clear. Further the weekly "Women's Page" of *Gaskiya* refrained from making comment on the editorial debate raging elsewhere in the newspaper.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the NPC defended its stand that Islam prohibited women's political involvement. In 1957, they were successful in blocking a motion to give women special representation in the Northern Region House of Assembly.⁶¹ The following telegrams were exchanged in 1962 between Sarkin Dawaki Bello (NPC representative to the Nigerian Parliament, Lagos) and the Sardauna of Sokoto.

21 August, Sarkin Dawaki to Sardauna:

Have followed with deep interest and appreciation your stand on women Franchise. Your stand is right. Be firm. God will always be with you.

22 August, Sardauna to Sarkin Dawaki:

Your much respected telegram received with respect. You know I should and did it for NPC and Muslim cause. We will never be dictated to by any brute.⁶²

With a debate that frequently touched upon such topics as whether or not women should be secluded in *kulle* and what type of education women should receive, it is clear

that the question of whether or not women should have a political role was only one aspect of the conflict between the NPC and NEPU. What was actually at stake was whether or not women were to be relegated to “traditional” roles (as perceived by the parties) in all aspects of life, or whether they were to have a choice to pursue a more progressive lifestyle if they so desired. The statements by the NPC that such institutions as *kulle*, restrictions on women’s interaction with men and limitations on female education required that women’s participation in politics be limited, were tantamount to Government sanction of these same institutions and practices. Indeed, this was the case. For example, during the 1950’s the NPC succeeded in placing laws on the books of some parts of the Northern Region that made it a crime for married women to go out of their houses — even to attend gatherings such as naming ceremonies, weddings or funerals. NEPU reacted strongly to this law. A letter to the Kano Resident stated:

Not only is this a terrible precedent but a shocking retrogressive step in the emancipation of northern women... This we see as an act that will certainly bring about confusion and make us look ridiculous and primitive in the eyes of the modern world... [it] goes beyond the law, Islam and common sense.

The acting Resident, M.C. McClintock, reacted sharply to NEPU’s letter, and replied that the law had been “designed to arrest progressive deterioration in Moral Standards,” and had been arrived at in consultation with a committee “most qualified to advise on this point.”⁶³ Those consulted were none other than the Emir of Kano and his advisers, all staunch backers of the NPC.

The Politics behind the Debate

It should be noted that the successful resistance of the NPC to women’s suffrage was in some ways counter-intuitive. The Northern Region was the only one of Nigeria’s three semi-autonomous regions not to extend the vote to women, and in doing so limited its ability to lay claim to political dominance based on its significantly larger population. The answer to this quandary, though, lies in the politics of the Northern Region itself. While the NPC frequently played upon the “Islamic” nature of the North, the truth was that the region was home to several million non-Muslims, a point frequently cited by opposition parties in calling for women’s suffrage. These parties, particularly the Action Group, National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, and the United Middle-Belt Congress often requested that if Islam forbade women from voting, then non-Muslim women within the North should still have the right to vote if they so desired.⁶⁴ As one opponent of the NPC stated in the course of a House of Representatives debate on the subject:

As you are aware, the Northern Region has a diverse population, speaking different dialects, having different customs and traditions. In my humble opinion, I beg to suggest that the Government should relax this rule and allow Christian and Pagan women to vote. It

is understood that the reason why women in the extreme North are not allowed to vote is due solely to religious reasons. But in places like the Tivs, the Idomas and so on, women are allowed to do things equally as men. I see no reason why women in our own country should not be allowed to vote. If the Northern Government wants women in the extreme North not to vote, they should allow our women to vote for us.⁶⁵

Such a situation was, indeed, exactly what the NPC feared. In truth, the very restrictions which the NPC cited as reasons for limiting female participation in politics (perceived religious strictures, seclusion, poor education) would probably have kept the great majority of the female Muslim population from voting if the vote had been extended. These restrictions, though, would have much less effect on non-Muslim populations. Estimates conservatively placed the non-Muslim female population at over one million.⁶⁶ This situation could have given a significant boost to the Middle Belt Christian and Pagan vote that largely supported the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), a party that sought to carve a new region out of the southern section of the North. If the UMBC were to have attained its goal, the Northern Region would have been in dire danger of losing its political dominance over the smaller and less populous southern regions — and hence the nation as a whole.⁶⁷ Similarly, if any Muslim women were to vote, it is likely that they would have been of the better educated and more progressive type that was drawn to NEPU — helping that party in its resistance to NPC rule. Indeed, the NPC was very much aware of the national political contest as well as that within the Northern Region. It is interesting to note that those Northern women who resided in either of the southern regions were encouraged to take advantage of women’s right to suffrage in these territories and vote for parties in alliance with the NPC.⁶⁸

By keeping the discourse on the topic of women’s political rights limited to a debate over Islamic ideology, the NPC was able to direct attention away from the issue of the internal politics of the Northern Region. For its own part, NEPU could not avoid the focus of the debate without appearing that it could not meet the NPC’s arguments based on their own interpretation of religious ideology. Such a situation would have been a serious setback for a party that in large part based its legitimacy on a claim to greater Islamic knowledge. Similarly, by limiting the argument largely to a question of Islamic interpretation, the NPC kept the potential for British interference to a minimum, since official British policy was to remain neutral in religious matters — particularly when the interests of the *Masu Sarauta* might be compromised by their involvement. When interviewed regarding the British stance on women’s suffrage in Northern Nigeria, Alan Lennox-Boyd, Secretary of State for the Colonies replied: “This is clearly a matter for the Northern Region themselves.”⁶⁹ Further, since the British were themselves not in accordance with the U.N. Convention on the Political Rights of Women (they did not allow women into

the House of Lords), they were unlikely to force the issue on the Northern Region.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the issue of women's political and social rights was a very telling one, as the conflict between the NPC and NEPU serves both to show us how religion was central to the politics of the period, and also to offer considerable insights into women's status during the period — offering far greater historical perspective to our understanding of the status of women during this critical period in Nigerian history. Contrary to the understanding of most contemporary literature on women in Northern Nigeria, it is clear that the debate over women's political and social roles has been raging for some time, and that the debate has been deeply intertwined with discussions of the region's religious and historical self-identity. Also, the conflict between the NPC and NEPU over the rights of women points up the familiar theme of women serving as carriers of culture within conservative constructions of social mores.

It would seem that the NPC's strategy of limiting the political participation of women in the Northern Region by reference to a conservative interpretation of Islamic ideology and tradition worked greatly to the party's advantage. The NPC was successful in keeping the right to vote out of women's hands throughout the First Republic — despite the continuous demands of all opposition parties. While the NPC was successful in the short run, in the long run NEPU was to see its goals achieved. With the collapse of the First Republic, northern women, Muslim and non-Muslim, were to be given the vote. Further, the attention NEPU commanded in the course of the debate helped improve the awareness of a great portion of the northern populace regarding the rights of women in Islam and helped weaken the hegemony of the conservative interpretation of Islamic sources. These factors did not seem to have been lost on the female voters of the region, who were said to have been a decisive bloc in helping to give the Peoples Redemption Party (NEPU's Second Republic incarnation) a strong showing in several key northern states in the 1979 elections.⁷⁰

Notes

¹ Richard L. Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation* (Princeton, 1963), p. 419.

² Rima Shawulu, *Gambo Sawaba* (Jos, Nigeria, 1990) pp. 46-48.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴ Interview with Alhaji Tanko Yakasai, June 6, 1993.

⁵ Interview with Hajiya Jumai Wool, June 5, 1993.

⁶ Shawulu, *Gambo Sawaba*, p. 49.

⁷ Hajiya Jumai Wool, June 5, 1993. The informant here used the word *bawa*, which is generally translated as "slave." It may very well be that Ladi Kara was one of the Emir's concubines.

⁸ Alhaji Tanko Yakasai, June 6, 1993.

⁹ *Gaskiya*, July 5, 1957.

¹⁰ NAK, "Northern Women Organizations," PRE/2, ACC/471, Agency Mark PRE/291, September 8, 1963.

¹¹ Hajiya Jumai Wool, June 5, 1993.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Alhaji Tanko Yakasai, June 6, 1993.

¹⁴ Renee Ilene Pitten, "Marriage and Alternative Strategies: Career Patterns of Hausa Women in Katsina City," Ph.D. dissertation, Anthropology, (SOAS, 1979/1980).

¹⁵ Alhaji Durimin Iya, *Gaskiya*, November 2, 1956.

¹⁶ For a similar dynamic in the Gold Coast, see Jean Allman, "Rounding Up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante," *Journal of African History*, 37, 2 (1996): pp. 195-214.

¹⁷ See, for example, *Daily Comet* July 16, 1959, "Any Politics in Raid of Kano Prostitutes?" See also, *Daily Comet*, July 17, 1959, "N.A. Police and Prostitutes."

¹⁸ Hajiya Jumai Wool, June 5, 1993.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Hajiya Gambo Sawaba, *Nigerian Citizen*, March 5, 1958. See also Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties*, p. 419.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Shawulu, *Gambo Sawaba*, pp. 80, 94, 99. *Yan Mahaukita* (Hausa) translates as "Children of Madmen." Such attacks were by no means limited to female NEPU members. Both the NPC and NEPU employed armed gangs (the NEPU's being the Positive Action Wing or P.A.W., who were known for wearing calabash helmets). The NPC's size and wealth, not to mention their influence over the courts and Native Authority police, tended to give them a distinct advantage in terms of political violence. Without exception, former NEPU members reported physical attacks — ranging from simple beatings to hit-and-run attacks with automobiles to allegations of outright torture.

²³ *Nigerian Citizen*, June 22, 1957.

²⁴ Interestingly, this remarkable source has been largely untouched by scholars of women and Islam in Nigeria.

²⁵ Given the size of this debate, only a small portion of the arguments can be presented here.

²⁶ Malam Isa Katsina, *Gaskiya*, December 4, 1956.

²⁷ Isa Wali, *Gaskiya*, October 16, 1956.

²⁸ *Gaskiya*, September 11, 1956.

²⁹ *Ibid.* It is interesting to note that this same argument regarding Aisha as an example of legitimate political leadership in the classical period of Islam is (independently) advanced by Leila Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven, 1992), p. 75.

³⁰ *Gaskiya*, September 18, 1956.

³¹ Isa Wali, *Gaskiya*, September 18, 1956.

³² Isa Wali, *Gaskiya*, October 19, 1956.

³³ Isa Wali, *Gaskiya*, September 11, 1956.

³⁴ *Gaskiya*, October 9, 1956.

³⁵ Isa Wali, *Gaskiya*, October 9, 1956.

³⁶ Isa Wali, *Gaskiya*, October 9, 1956. Again, it is interesting to note that this same argument is advanced by Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam*.

³⁷ Hajiya Jumai Wool, June 5, 1993.

³⁸ *Gaskiya* September 18, 1956.

³⁹ Isa Wali, *Gaskiya*, September 25, 1956.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Gaskiya*, September 18, 1956.

⁴² Alhaji Tanko Yakasai, April 17, 1993.

⁴³ The Dokajin Kano was the head of the Fulan's settlement outside Kano city.

⁴⁴ Alhaji Abubakar, Dokajin Kano, *Gaskiya*, October 30, 1956.

⁴⁵ Alhaji Salihu Durmin Iya, *Gaskiya*, November 20, 1956.

⁴⁶ Sheik Nasiru Kabara, June 27, 1993.

⁴⁷ Alhaji Salihu Durmin Iya, *Gaskiya*, October 30, November 13,

1956.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Musa Bojude, *Gaskiya*, November 20, 1956.

⁵⁰ *Gaskiya*, December 7, 1956.

⁵¹ Musa Bojude, *Gaskiya*, November 20, 1956.

⁵² Alhaji Salihi Durimin Iya, *Gaskiya* November 15, 1956. This particular editorial is in interesting contrast to Iya's earlier claim (October 30) that "Satan beautifies women who leave their homes."

⁵³ Mohamad Sagir, *Gaskiya*, October 30, 1956.

⁵⁴ *Nigerian Citizen*, July 20, 1957.

⁵⁵ See, for example NAK, "Girls education in Sokoto," SokPrOf. C. 145/146-156, January 20, 1955. Also see, NAK, KanoPrOf., AR2/15, 1957.

⁵⁶ *Nigerian Citizen*, January 8, 1958.

⁵⁷ *Nigerian Citizen*, February 20, 1965.

⁵⁸ Alhaji Abubakar, Dokajin Kano, *Gaskiya*, October 30, 1956.

⁵⁹ Saidu Ahmed, *Gaskiya*, November 13, 1956.

⁶⁰ Audu Danladi, *Gaskiya*, November 30, 1956.

⁶¹ NAK, PRE, R2219 "Political Rights of Women" (not surprisingly, this was a very thin file).

⁶² NAK, "Premier's Personal File," PRE/97.

⁶³ NAK, "NEPU Complaints and Court Cases," KanoPrOf, 2/73, PLT/5/154.

⁶⁴ See, for example, *Nigerian Citizen*, August 3, 1957.

⁶⁵ P. Deem Kpumm, House of Representatives Debates, February 24, 1959, p. 1114.

⁶⁶ *Daily Times*, May 1, 1958.

⁶⁷ Demands for a Middle-Belt region were a common facet of politics in Nigeria up to the end of the First Republic, with the UMBC and AG being the primary proponents of the creation of the new region.

⁶⁸ The NPC never contested seats outside of the Northern Region, instead preferring to operate through small opposition parties. The reliance on this approach shows to what degree the NPC relied on their dominance of the North as the key to national political power.

⁶⁹ *Nigerian Citizen*, May 20, 1959.

⁷⁰ Hajiya Jumai Wool, June 5, 1993. See also Barbara Callaway and Lucy Creevey, *The Heritage of Islam: Women, Religion and Politics in West Africa* (Boulder, 1994), pp. 148-149.
