

# Polygamy in Britain: Sharia in sheep's skin?

WHILE the controversy over Sharia law continues to rage dangerously in Nigeria, Muslims in unexpected places elsewhere in the world are becoming embroiled in debates of their own. When talking about parts of the world where Islam is prevalent, most people first consider regions of South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa's savannah belt.

It would, however, be surprising to many to know that there are millions of people in China known as 'Hui' who are considered 'ethnic Muslims,' or that in the early 1800s Muslims in Brazil carried out revolt after revolt against their slave masters. Another relatively unknown fact is that Cape Town, South Africa has a large historical Islamic community. In fact, the Afrikaans language of the Afrikaner people who dominated the country during the apartheid era was actually first written in Arabic script by Islamic scholars. The reach of Islam, as this shows, is much broader than is usually imagined.

Within the early centuries of the Islamic expansion, Muslims were knocking on the gates of Western Europe and were only stopped in southern France, ruling the Iberian Peninsula for centuries thereafter. Towards the end of Europe's Middle Ages, Muslim conquerors invaded from the other direction and were only stopped at Vienna.

Thus, even though Western Europe may often seem to be the antithesis of the Islamic world, there were two important moments in its history when Islamic domination was very nearly a reality. Instead, Western Europe remained the bastion of Christianity and was the source from which the religion was taken to the ends of the earth after the launch of the modern missionary movement in the late 1700s.

In spite of the historical animosity between peoples from Western Europe and Islam, Islam is now taking an unexpected foothold there not through conversion, but through immigration. While indigenes of Europe are turning away from Christianity in particular and religion in general, immigrants from other lands arrive still passionate for their beliefs.

European governments assumed that within a generation these immigrants and their children, regardless of religion, would conform to the dominant cultural paradigm – a secularized society rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition. As renowned Gambian scholar of religion Lamin Sanneh predicted already in the 1970s, however, this of course did not happen.

If anything, many have become even more devout in an effort to keep some connection with their distant homelands. Now, they are getting political.

For example, in the mid-1990s, a Muslim was elected



•British Prime Minister, Tony Blair

*'Upon entering parliament, he dropped his environmental agenda and began lobbying for greater recognition of Islamic practice and belief?'*

to the Danish parliament running as a candidate for an environmental party. Immediately upon entering parliament, he dropped his environmental agenda and began lobbying for greater recognition of Islamic practice and belief, much to the consternation of his surprised constituents.

More recently, an important issue related to Muslim culture – polygamy – has been brought to national attention in the United Kingdom. The UK has historically been a Christian nation that for decades ruled millions of Muslims in its erstwhile empire. Now a religion and culture that they preferred to

confront at a distance has become an increasingly important political force at home. The polygamy issue is being championed by the Muslim Parliament, an organization founded in January 1992 to provide a unified voice for Muslims who felt that their concerns were not being met through Britain's

**Wiebe Boer**  
 Perspective of a Nigerian-American

mainstream political system.

Under the auspices of the Muslim Parliament, Muslims in Britain are arguing that polygamy should be legally permitted in recognition of their religious and cultural equality with those of other traditions.

If the UK does not lift its ban on polygamous marriage, a ban that forces hundreds of Muslims to live outside the law in Britain, the Muslim Parliament says they will take the issue to the European Court of Human Rights later in the year. It is particularly interesting that British Muslims are using distinctively Western concepts of human rights, concepts often criticized by Muslim states as being intrusive, to champion the cause of Islam in Europe.

The issue is more than just about Islamic marriage laws, and is rather a symbol of the growing strength of Muslims in Britain. Few realize how far Muslims have come in Europe over the last few years, a fact perhaps best symbolized by Prince Charles' status as the royal patron of the Islamic Text Society of Oxford. Who

would have imagined even a few decades ago that a future king of England would be so closely associated with an Islamic organization.

Although the debate in Britain is not as serious as the one in Nigeria, there are similarities between the call for polygamy in Britain and the call for Sharia in Nigeria. In both cases, Muslims are using systems of government that promote pluralism to further their own causes.

The long-term question, then, and one that Muslim leaders have a duty to answer, is this: How much pluralism will Muslims themselves permit if they take charge? This is certainly the question on the tip of people's tongues in Northern Nigeria, and might soon be an increasingly important British question as well.

So far, Islam has not had a very good record in this regard, except perhaps in Senegal and a few other countries. My prayer is that democratic Northern Nigeria will prove to be the exception, like Senegal, rather than the rule.

•Wiebe Boer is a Yale University Fulbright Fellow

## Sharia's second coming

Continued from Page 7

have no medicines. Our schools have no teachers. With Sharia, government will be answerable to God. It will have to solve our problems," he said.

Besides corrupt and incompetent government, many ordinary Nigerians suffer from crime, which many Muslims think will decrease under Sharia. Earlier this year, authorities in Zamfara, the first state to implement Sharia, amputated the hand of a convicted cattle thief. That was seen by many here as sending a strong signal that crime would not be tolerated.

"It will stop crime, petty crime. Islamic law is much stricter than ordinary law and criminals cannot bribe the judges to let them go like they can in an ordinary court," said Ibrahim Yakubu, a doctor.

"People, our leaders, and the ordinary people, will have to be more responsible. Sharia entails people's religious beliefs. You cannot mess around," he said.

Sheikh Isa Waziri, the chief imam of Kano State,

said Wednesday that Islamic law was an essential part of Islam. "Sharia is the backbone, the compass, of Muslims all over the world, showing them their direction," he said.

But Muslims in northern Nigeria still need more education on Sharia and all aspects of Islam, he admitted. "The people need enlightenment," he said.

Kwankwaso agreed and said people should learn to change their behaviour as well. "The time is ripe for us to change our habits to conform to the dictates of Islam," he said.

"Islam urges people to follow in the footsteps of the prophet, and show patience, honesty and trustworthiness and preserve the rights of women, children and neighbours," he said.

In the crowd Wednesday, thousands of youths celebrated, shouting Allahu Akbar (God is greater), but apparently with little understanding of what they were celebrating.

Islamic lawyer Abubakar Mika'il Hassan explained that many simply believed that the in-

troductory of Sharia would cure the many problems besetting this country, Africa's most populous.

"This has a very long history in Nigeria," Hassan told AFP. "We Muslims have been yearning to see the Sharia code be implemented for many years. It is our right. We are grateful for the God almighty that Sharia will be implemented today," he said.

With Kano's decision to join the Sharia train, northern leaders may have signposted their determination to set themselves on a collision course with the government of President Olusegun Obasanjo, pushing ahead with the implementation of strict Islamic law, despite fears it could provoke bloodshed and unrest.

Speaking in Cairo on Tuesday, Obasanjo played down the threat of more violence in Nigeria following the declaration Wednesday that Islamic law, or Sharia, will be applied in Kano, northern Nigeria's most populous state.

Continued on Page 12