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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Muslim Women Sing: Hausa Popular Song.**

Beverly B. Mack.

2004. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bibliography, index, glossary, 8 figures, index, 302 pp.

This book is a laudable addition to the lean body of literature on women's creative activities within the broader framework of women's studies in Africa. Mack's study of the lives of Hausa Muslim women is based on extensive ethnographic research in Kano state, one of the seven states in the north-west geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Mack's book explores the syncretic blend of song and poetry as a fulcrum for representing and interpreting creative activities and the lives of Hausa Muslim women in northern Nigeria. These creative activities are summarised under the term, *Wakoki*, a Hausa word which integrates poetry, song, dance and writing. Prior to this study, scholars such as Barrow (1972), Callaway (1976), Yakubu (2001), Bergstrom (2002), and Renne (2004), investigated the lives of Hausa Muslim women from diverse perspectives. However, *Muslim Women Sing: Hausa Popular Song* embodies a departure from pervasive notions, familiar generalisations, and the typecast representation of Hausa Muslim women and Islam in northern Nigeria. Mack notes that Hausa Muslim women are their own agents, their roles are flexible and negotiable, and they insist on lives that incorporate creative activity into the demands of their primary domestic roles (4).

*Muslim Women Sing* is divided into two sections which are preceded by introductory notes, including a motivation and a brief description of the different phases of the development of the book. The first section comprises of six chapters interspersed with profiles of female poets and performing artists. The first part offers a valuable discourse on the social, cultural, and religious dimensions of the Hausa Muslim woman. The use of the phrase "Hausa Muslim women" suggests the existence of other religious practices besides Islam among the Hausa people and possible variances in their religio-cultural exchange. This book examines the profound imbrication of Islam and cultural practices among Hausa Muslim people and ways these are articulated and reified in the songs they sing, their writings, and their modes of dressing.

The significance of this book lies primarily in its ability to interrogate, reconcile, and contextualize stereotypes of Hausa Muslim women, which, she observes, are "...reinforced by western scholarship and years of long focus on Hausa men's arena in scholarship" (3). These stereotypes portray Hausa Muslim women as subjugated, illiterate, acquiescent, and redundant. Mack asserts that beyond

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domains of practices like *pardah* (wife seclusion) and realms of domesticity in which Hausa Muslim women are required to function, they are actively involved in creative activities (*Wakoki*) like singing, poetry, playing of musical instruments, writing, and dancing. In addition to its entertainment and communicative role *Wakoki* serves as a bastion for educational and spiritual fulfilment. Along similar lines of emphasising women's involvement in creative activities, *Muslim Women Sing* contains a rich collection of poems by Muslim women "...that men say women do not write, the songs men say women do not sing" (4). This book succeeds at interrogating the deployment of *Wakoki* as an important means of creating agency, navigating roles, and negotiating "boundaries" amid socio-cultural and religious expectations. *Wakoki* creates a platform for the expression of the "unsayable" as its performance enjoys a degree of immunity. Among other aspects, the book describes the fluidity of these gender expectations and how factors like age, marital status, educational level, social status, ethnicity, and socio-economic status aid in blurring or crossing these gender lines.

Drawing on the art, experiences and profiles of established female poets and singers in Hausa society; Hajiya 'Yar Shehu, Hauwa Gwaram, Hajia Faji Hauwa Mai Duala, Maizrgadi, Binta Katsina, Barmani Maimuna Choge, her privileged access to the royal harem and fluency in Hausa language, Mack describes the various ways they engage in creative activities. She offers an in-depth description of mediums through which skills like the composition of poems, songs and the playing of musical instruments are derived and honed. The inclusion of their profiles is instructive as it provides an insight into how the amalgam of western education and Islam influences the development of compositional practices in Hausa society.

Following an explanation of women in creative activities is a description of the parameters or contexts of these activities. Mack notes that performances mostly take place for female audiences within the privacy of the *harem* (household). While acknowledging "restrictive practices" such as the *pardah* (wife seclusion) which are fostered by the dominant patriarchal society fused with Islamic cultural practices, Mack reimagines them as unique creative expressive spaces for women and an avenue for release from the many challenges of their everyday life. Implied in all of this is the ability of this text to answer questions of the status of the woman in Hausa Muslim society, her contribution to society and how she articulates her voice within the imbrication of socio-cultural and religious proscriptions. Through a compelling narrative, this book limns the rich musical culture of the Hausa people, which is evident in their musical instruments, songs, dances, vocal styles, organisation principles, and performance styles.

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The second part of the book is composed of a collection of thirty-five *Wakoki*, which blends with a commentary on contemporary, secular and religious subjects. These *Wakoki* are re-enacted as a historical and topical repertoire drawing on a variety of themes such as praise, politics, childcare, hygiene, religious, and moral decadence. These *Wakoki* reflect the evolving status of women as agents of public opinion on current social and cultural issues in society. The religious preludes and doxology that is attendant of each *Waka* (a singular form of *Wakoki*) advances the underlining degree of intercalation of Islam and traditional practices among the Hausa people.

This book largely succeeds at amplifying the voices of “invisible women” and generating a pivot for rethinking the essentialised perception of women in Hausa Muslim society, however, it is fraught with misrepresentations of territorial and geographical mappings in northern Nigeria. For instance, loose generalisations as in using northern Nigeria, as an alternative for Kano state is misleading. Firstly, Kano accounts for only one out of the estimated thirteen predominantly Hausa states in northern Nigeria. The book can not be representative of the entire northern Nigeria. Secondly, the book has a sense of generalisation, which does not take into consideration variegated Hausa Muslim cultures in other parts of northern Nigeria. Besides the mention of Kano state, the author also fails to give account of specific locations in Kano state.

While the attempt at explaining the rationale behind *purdah* and proffering a humanistic approach to writing about the culture of other people is commendable, the excerpt below strikes as an overtly ambitious conclusion of other people’s lived experiences. Mack writes:

Wife seclusion is often reported by scholars to be restrictive and oppressive but anyone who has lived in Kano knows that it would be a privilege to be freed from doing the marketing, standing in line to pay taxes or electric bills, or negotiating traffic in a car or on foot.(7)

The above submission negates the account of many of the prominent poets referenced by the author, such as Binta Katsina and Mainmuna who through their *Wakoki* advocate for women to be engaged in professions and equal opportunities for men and women:

Women of Nigeria!  
 You should try to understand  
 You could do every kind of work  
 Women of Nigeria, you will do every kind of work.  
 You should be given the chance to take charge  
 You can do office work

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You can do administrative work  
 You should be given the chance to take charge. (101)

The author describes the above *Waka* as "...directed mainly at secluded, less educated women and is a form of advocacy for women to participate actively in the public domain" (*ibid.*).

There is an erroneous classification of the Hausa and Fulani as one group by usage of the term Hausa-Fulani interchangeably for the Hausa people. While I acknowledge the pervasive reference to the Hausa and Fulani as one group in diverse realms and traces of homogeneity between them, especially in Islam, cognisance should be taken of striking differences in their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic roots.

Overall, *Muslim Women Sing* is presented in an accessible style and presents a good attempt at filling the lacuna in scholarship on Muslim women. Through a description of Hausa women's creative activities, the book acknowledges points of confluence and divergence in the religious and cultural paradigms in Hausa society and offers a valuable insight into the lives of Hausa Muslim women. Mack makes a good point in observing the repertoire of Hausa Muslim women activities as a locus for rethinking Hausa society and cultural heritage at large. *Muslim Women Sing* sets the tone for the further investigation of African women's creative activities. As such it provides a point of departure of the examination of African cultural practices from the long bashed and excessively critical lens, and, it provides more objectivity by interrogating the context of their cultural practices.

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