Social Welfare in Muslim Societies in Africa (review)

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Book Reviews

Holger Weiss ed. *Social Welfare in Muslim Societies in Africa.* Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002. Pp. 189.

Social Welfare in Muslim Societies in Africa is a timely study in light of recent global developments. The book explores the prospects for a social welfare state founded entirely on the fixed vision of Islam as "a religion, an ideology, and a system of life" (12). The recent resurgence of the concept of an Islamic state under pious leaders emerged from the pervading disillusionment of the masses with the various postcolonial states in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Radical Muslim intellectuals, resentful of the Western capitalist and socialist models, have argued that the only way forward for today's Muslim societies is a return to the strict dogmas of the Caliphate Islam. This view is quite reminiscent of the position held by some postcolonial African intellectuals—notable among them the late President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania—who contended that the route to Africa's development resided in a return to the "indigenous" practice of African socialism (*Ujamaa*). Thus, by focusing on the African continent troubled by a multitude of socioeconomic and political ills, this educative volume takes the reader through an interesting world of logic, theorem, idealism, vis-à-vis the actual challenges of implementing social welfare in African Islamic societies.

The quest for an Islamic welfare state is predicated on two key concepts, "Islamic economics" and "*zakat*" (or almsgiving). Without necessarily calling for a rejection of modernity, Islamic economics, as envisaged by its proponents, is a midway model between pure liberal capitalism and state-run socialism (15). For the Muslim intellectuals, one of the distinctions between the Western model and the ideal Islamic version is found in *Zakat*, "a voluntary wealth tax which Muslims pay in recognition of their social responsibilities" (16).

This book is fascinating for its accommodation and integration of a diversity of views into a comprehensible volume. The various case studies in eight chapters provide the reader with insights into a variety of agents and concepts in their appraisal of the scattered patches of social welfare programs in Muslim societies of Africa in particular, and the world in general. The authors contextualized value judgments with empiricism. A review of this nature cannot do justice to all the essays here; only a cursory account is possible.

In chapter one, Holger Weiss presents a broad theoretical introduction to *zakat* by assessing its viability as a model of modern economic organization. This is followed by Endre Stiansen's assessment of Islamic banking in Sudan, which raises the crucial question about the security of non-Muslims in an economic system solely run by Islamic doctrines. In Sudan, as the study reveals, "Muslims and non-Muslims alike have to follow the same laws" demanding conformity "with Islamic norms and regulations" (62). In chapter three, Franz Kogelmann's treatment of Morocco offers a perspective on the twist and turns that have marked the practice of social welfarism in the ancient African kingdom since the precolonial times. The succeeding *makhzans* (the Moroccan governments) have been, at various times, challenged by the *Qadi* (Muslim judges), the imperial French administrators, and the modernizing elite over the control of the pious endowments (71-76).

In chapter four, Knut Vikor examines Sufism and social welfare in the Bedouin society of the Sahara. He disputes the unhidden skepticism about the practicability of social welfare outside its Western model. In the Bedouin society, as Vikor explains, Sufism provided "spiritual or symbolic capital" and, if you like, the political and civic capitals for power struggles and the general integration of its members "with the surrounding social structure of the desert" (95-96). Similarly, Rudiger Seesemann's analysis on the role of the Sufi orders in contemporary Sudan corroborates the view that Sufis "are concerned with the spiritual as well as with material needs of the followers" (114). According to Seesemann, only "a better understanding of the *zawiya* [preparation grounds for jihad] and the *khalwa* [union of spirit] as arenas in which social interaction takes place would allow us to assess the impact Sufis have on social welfare" in Sudan (115). In chapter six, Roman Loimeier highlights the staunch opposition confronting Quaranic schools in Senegal. Among the adversaries of the marabouts (the established religious scholars) in the West African state are the secular state, global development agencies such as UNICEF, and Islamic reformers (123-25). The succeeding chapter by Sulemana Mumuni surveys the Islamic non-governmental organizations in Accra, Ghana. Principal among them is the Ghana Islamic

Development Association (GIDA) whose central role is to support the socio-religious status of Muslims in the country (160). Weiss concludes the volume with the concept of Islamic economy as articulated in Sokoto, Nigeria, in the light of social justice and accountability.

By and large, the contributors are divided on the viability of an Islamic welfare state. This division apparently emerged from their perceptions of the "Islamic," the "modern," and the "other" as alternative frameworks for understanding social welfares. This approach posses some paradigmatic problems. As Frederick Cooper's seminal essay "Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians," explicitly affirmed, such narratives of opposed choices often "impose a singular model of progress [and] posit a kaleidoscopic world of disparate and fragmentary communities, whether rigid or fluid." First, such biporaties ignore "how distance-crossing relationships are structured." Second, they fail to consider that "the local is not necessarily so 'local.'" Third, they privilege "the West" and evaluate the history of every other place in terms of "lacks." Fourth, they tend to surrender the tools "to analyze structures in which power coheres."[1] Similarly, Nancy Rose Hunt et al., in *Gendered Colonialisms in African History,* have argued that situating history within a bifurcated narrative, as some of the essays in this volume demonstrate, also tends to "flatten the complexity of local conflicts, dilemmas, and meaning-making that were at the core of social action."[2]

Therefore a perceptive student of comparative cultures may argue that social welfare is a universal culture. It is neither "European," nor "Islamic," nor "African," nor "Asian." Social welfare can be successfully implemented in any affluent society, especially in the industrialized economies. However, the exceptionality of oil-rich Middle Eastern countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and the limited successes of the less affluent states like Pakistan and Malaysia, must be duly considered in analyzing African issues. As Weiss has noted, the "picture that the modern adherents of Islamic economics present about the existence of a harmonious and perfectly just society during the times of the Prophet and his four successors" is purely idealistic (11). Such claims of "merrier Islam" wrongly imply that Muslim societies are static, and that a society can simply return to the past, even after nine hundred years. Again, such views tend to ignore the world of individual differences and preferences even among the so-*Ummah.* Neither Islamic virtues alone nor faith in extreme capitalist practices can satisfy the high costs of modern social welfare systems. Rather, a sustained creation of wealth and visionary leadership holds the key to a successful welfare state.

Overall, this multidisciplinary work is an important contribution to our knowledge of ethnicity and the sociological history of Islam in contemporary Africa. Also, all those interested in the process of modernization and socioeconomic change in the periphery of the global system will find this book a useful companion.

Raphael Chijioke Njoku

Marjane Satrapi. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Trans. Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003. Pp. 160.

Azar Nafisi. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books.* New York: Random House, 2003. Pp. 384.

Recently there has been a spate of books written by Iranian women living in exile recounting their painful, tortured experiences following the Iranian revolution of 1979. *Persepolis* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* are two such works that have made best-seller lists and been widely acclaimed. Such an accomplishment by two very different Iranian writers is remarkable indeed. What is even more remarkable, however, is that these women have written memoirs at all. For in a culture where a woman's "modesty" affects not only her own reputation but also that of her extended family, it has long been considered improper for a woman to expose her personal inner life or that of her family to public scrutiny. It is not surprising, therefore, that autobiographical works by Iranian women are rare, that they are a recent phenomenon, and that most such works have been published not in Iran, but in the West.

First published in France, *Persepolis* has won a number of prestigious awards. It has been translated into Persian, German, Swedish, and English and has sold 150,000 copies. In this charming, humorous memoir, Marjane Satrapi not only narrates, but illustrates in comic-strip form the political turmoil that marked her early years growing up in Iran in the 1970s and 1980s. The child of educated, Westernized Iranians, she depicts, from a child's eye view and with a biting wit, the confusion and contradictions of life under an authoritarian regime—whether that of the Shah or of the Islamic Republic. Taking pride in the members of her family who were persecuted and imprisoned for their resistance to the Shah's authoritarian rule and having witnessed her parents' participation in anti-Shah demonstrations, she rejoices with them at the eventual overthrow of the monarchical regime. But her joy is short-lived, for before long, a new tyranny rears its ugly head—that of the Islamic Republic.

A spunky, spirited girl, Marjane demonstrates a reckless courage in sassing her teacher, wearing Nike shoes, sporting a Michael Jackson badge, and joining like-minded friends in dancing to punk rock. During the Iran-Iraq war, as Iraqi bombs begin to fall on Tehran, as news from the front gets worse and worse, as more and more young men are sent to certain death in minefields holding keys that