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Myth, Broken: Female Emirs Found in the Northern Parts of Nigeria

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Abstract - Contrary to long held erroneous notion that women leadership in Muslim society is anathema, it has been conclusively proved that this is false. Women leadership, particularly in traditional society, has been in existence in northern part of the country from time immemorial. As a result of our more than five years intensive research into this area, we can now prove with exactitude that female emirs exist in the north like their Obas and Obis counterparts in the Southern parts of the country. The concern of this paper is to shed light on the nature and character of female emirs found in the north.

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Myth, Broken: Female Emirs Found in the Northern Parts of Nigeria

F.A Olasupo

Abstract - **Contrary to long held erroneous notion that women leadership in Muslim society is anathema, it has been conclusively proved that this is false. Women leadership, particularly in traditional society, has been in existence in northern part of the country from time immemorial. As a result of our more than five years intensive research into this area, we can now prove with exactitude that female emirs exist in the north like their Obas and Obis counterparts in the Southern parts of the country. The concern of this paper is to shed light on the nature and character of female emirs found in the north.**

I. Introduction

Sheik (Alhaji)AbubakarGummi, during the 1987 Local government election in 1987 boasted that he "did not hope to see a woman leader emerge in his life time" (Kukah, 1983:240).Not just in modern Local government system but more importantly in traditional government where religion and tradition, more than any other factor, keep women out of competition for public office by leaving the public space for male competitors only. Two decades after, in 2007, a counterweight response to Sheik's out-bust was provided by Agency France Press (AFP). According to it, AFP, "In Kumbwada, a village of about 400 kilometres away from Kano, a woman is the traditional and religious leader. No man dares as any that assumes the throne dies mysteriously within a week, Agency France Press (AFP) reports" (The Nation, 2007: 5)

These provided the leads that spur our visiting places in the north where information says women emirs exist. Areas in the north where female emirs have been discovered include:Kumbwanda inMuyan Local Government of Niger state; ArmadoDebo in Ganye Local government,Nokowa inNuman Local Government of Adamawa state; andIlesaBaruba, Gwanaraand Okuta inIlesaBaruba Local Government ofKwara state. Two types of female traditional rulers are found in these areas: Substantive female emirs and gender balance or dual ruler-ship in emir-ship (Olasupo, 2007:183; 2010: 132).It is the concern of this paper to present factual and pictorial evidences of these starting with substantive female rulers in the North.

II. Substantive Female Emirs

These are female emirs who are sovereign authorities in their communities. They are both political and religious leaders of their communities. As a matter of fact ruler-ship by males in these communities is forbidden as any attempt by them always result in mysterious death(The Nation, 2007: 5). Such communities included, Kumbada, ArnadoDebo and Nokowo. In providing pictorial evidence of this, we shall limit ourselves to one of them which is the female emir of Kumbada, HajiaHadisaMuhammed.

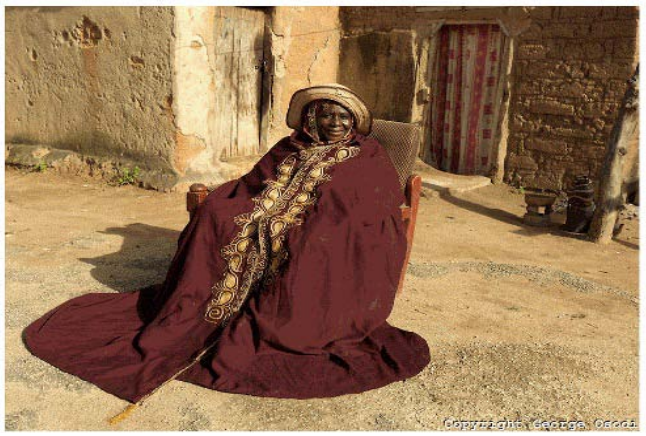

Figure 1 : The female Emir of Kumbada, Hajia Hadisa Muhammad robbed and sitting infront of her palace
Source : nigeriamonarchs.photoshelter.com/image/loooW3JML 82JLgg



Figure 2 : Female Emir of Kumbada in Niger state, Hajia Hadisa Muhammad, sitting amidst her kingmakers in her palace
Source : nigeriamonarchs.photoshelter.com/image/ looooW3JML82JLgg

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Figure 3 : Female Emir Hadisa Muhammad in the midst of Kumbada Council of Elders
Source : nigeriamonarchs.photoshelter.com/image/ looooW3JML82JLgg

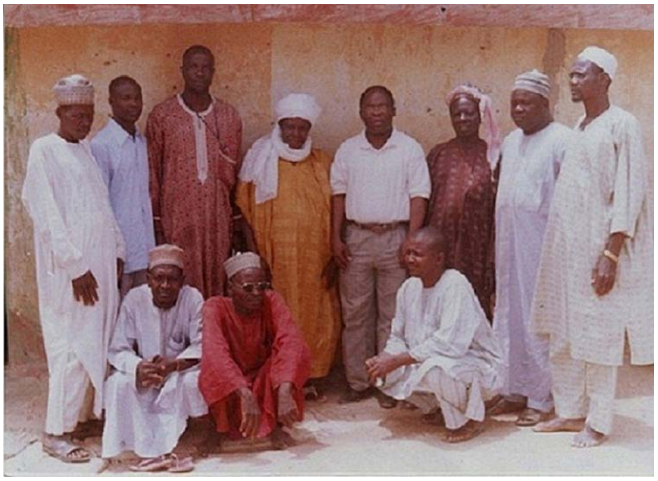

Figure 4 : The researcher in group photograph with female Emir of Kubambada, HajiaHadisa Muhammad.Source:Photo by Asela photography

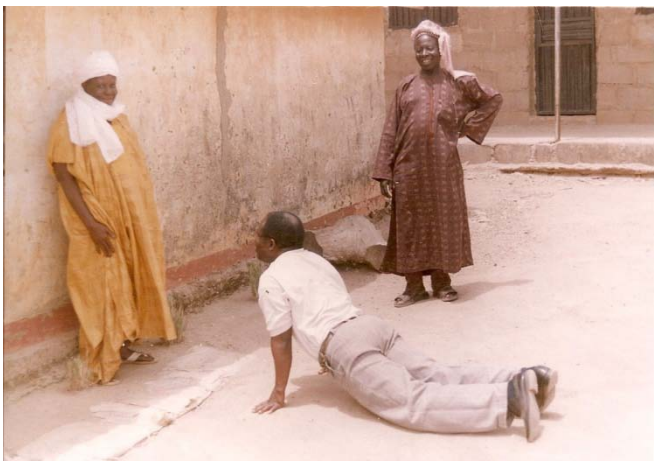

Figure 5 : The researcher, F.A Olasupo, paying homage to the female Emir. Source:Photo by Asela photography

III. Gender Balance Emir-Ship

Unlike the West and Eastern parts of Nigeria, Gender balance in traditional governance, from the northern part of the country, among the BaatonuBarubas in particular, presents, spectacular and interesting scene. Here, both the female and male kings are princesses and princes from the same ruling house. In other words, they are either brothers and sisters or cousins but having the same royal blood. When the office of kingship or emir-ship is vacant, princes compete among themselves to occupy the throne while the princesses also compete among themselves for female equivalent of emir-ship throne. Thus, while males are kings(Emirs) in their communities, their counterpart Queens (or female emirs) are variously referred to as Magajia, Yonkogi and Buyonkafo in the same communities (Hussaini, 2003:39-40, 93; Ogungbola, 1995:21). They have their own palaces, kingmakers and staff of offices like that of their male counterparts.

In my interview with Emirs in these communities, these are their reactions: According to the Emir of Gwanara, Alhaji (Dr.) SabiAbdullahiIdris (OFR) Kotokotogi II, "the Queen and I are Prima inter pares (first among equals). Both of us are from the same ruling house and are princess and prince before we ascended the throne. So, we are equal except that I have a slight edge over her. She is the only person who could overrule my decision under certain circumstances. She is a powerful kingmaker with regards to male emir-ship throne and without her support nobody can become Emir" (Interview, 05/022013).



Figure 6 : The Researcher, F.A Olasupo, paying homage to female Emir of Gwanara, HajiaHawa Suleiman, The Magajia of Gwanara

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Figure 7 : The Researcher, F.A Olasupo, in group photograph with the female Emir of Gwanara, HajiaHawa Suleiman, and her female titled Chiefs

As for the Emir of Okuta, AlhajiIdrisAbubakar, SheroBetete III, he confirmed what Emir SabiAbdullahi said, but added that "there is important festival called Ganni festival, that is held annually among Baatombu (Barubas). When the Emirs hold their own, a week or so after, Queens also hold theirs. In Okuta, as I have the right to ride on the horse on that day, so does the Queen also have the right to ride on a horse on the day she is celebrating her counterpart femaleGanni festival". Corroborating pivotal role which female Emirs play in the appointment of an Emir, as Emir of Gwanara said, the Emir of Okuta added that male Emirs in Baruba areas also play vital role in the appointment female Emir (Interview, 05/022013).



Figure 8 : The female Emir of Okuta, HajiaMariyam, The Yonkogi of Okuta holding her staff of office



Figure 9 : The Researcher, F.A Olasupo, paying homage to female Emir of Okuta, Hajia Mariyam, the Yonkogi of Okuta.Photo by Dr.Akiode photography

At Ilesalbaruba, the Emir Engineer Bio Usman, had travelled abroad but we were attended to by his next in command who told us that there is no doubt woman traditional ruler exist in the town. She is, according him, a princess before she emerged as the female Emir. She is the one the subjects must see first before seeing the male emir. Every Friday, he says, she comes from her palace to sit in front of the male palace to receive homage from subjects who come to pay homage to the male emir.



Figure 10 : The Researcher, F.A Olasupo, paying homage to the female Emir of Ilesha Baruba, Hajia Maryam Ishiak, The Buyonkafo of Ilesha Baruba

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Figure 11 : The Research, F.A Olasupo, in group photograph with the female Emir of Ilesha Ibaruba and her titled Chiefs

This tradition of gender balance in governance, found in all the four regions of the country, comparatively, slightly vary from one region to the other. In the Eastern part of the country vis-à-visMid-West, traditionally, it is the first daughter of Obi that is made the Omu. In the West, the institution of female kings is separate and distinct from that of the male. They have their own ruling houses that are separate from those of the male, and only female (princesses) from those ruling houses are permitted to contest for it.In the north, among BaatonuBaruba to be specific, the princes and the princesses are from the same ruling houses. While the princes metamorphose into Emir after stiff competition, so do the princesses metamorphose into Queens (Female Emirs), after stiff competition among princess contestants for the female throne. Thus, there is a slight similarity between the institutions of female king in the north and the east. While in the two regions male and female kings are from the same ruling houses, there is divergence in the procedure by which female kings in both regions ascend the throne. In the east, it is strictly the first daughter of the Obi; and so there is no competition. In the north on the other hand, all the princesses from the ruling houses would have to compete for the coveted throne out of which one emerges as female Emir.

IV. Emir (Male King) Queen (Female King)



Figure 12 : Alhahi (Dr) Sabi Abdullahildris Hajia Hawa Sulaiman



Figure 13 : Kotokotogi II, (OFR) Emir of GwanaraTheMagajia of Gwanara

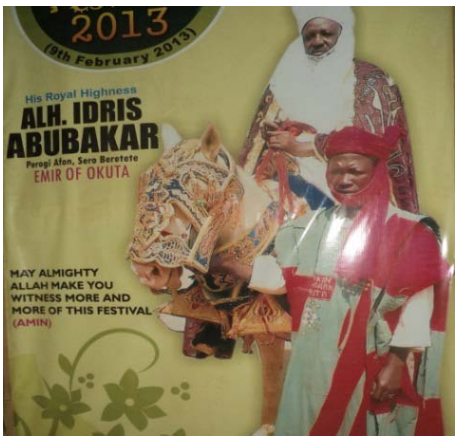

Figure 14 : AlhajiIdris Abubakar Shero Betete Hajia Mariyam

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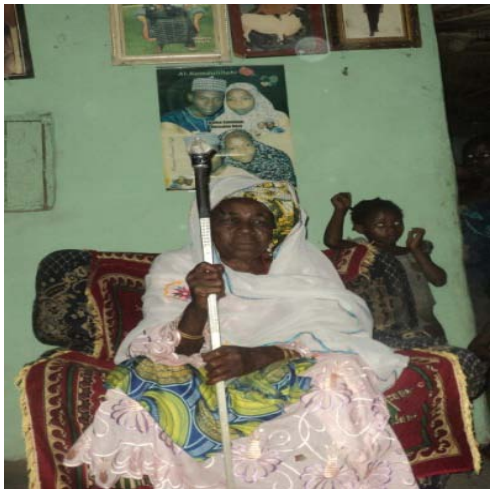

Figure 15 : The Yong The Emir of OkutaKogi of Okuta

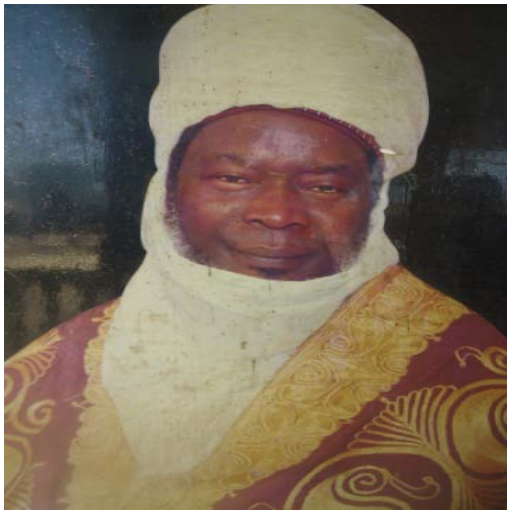

Figure 16 : ENG. Bio Usman AbubakarHajia Maryam Ishiak,



Figure 17 : The Derekureku III, Emir of Ilesha Baruba Buyonkafo of Ilesha Baruba

*All photos by Dr.Akiode Photography.

However, a lot of interesting observations are made between male kings and female kings institutions. First is education. Our observation reveals that male Obas, Emirs and Obis are well educated as you have among them Professors, Lawyers, Medical doctors, seasoned administrators and of course retired military officers. This combined with their wealth of bureaucratic experience and strong business connections, secured strong influence for them at all the levels of governance – Local, State and Federal (Olasupo, 2002:2). The opposite is the case with those of female kings in virtually all the regions. Apart from the female king of Akure, ObabinrinFadahunsi, who is an economist; Dr.MarthiaDunkwu, a successful business woman from Delta State and, of course, Barrister Alulbiam of Unwana in Eboyin State, all others found are uneducated in western sense.

This tended to impact negatively on their social status that made them less visible. A comparison of the gender palaces show that male palaces are genuine palaces as State and Local governments regularly maintain and upgrade them. All though in the west and eastern parts of the country, female kings' palaces predate advent of colonialism,it got neglected after the incursion and, even, departure of colonialism (Olasupo, 2010:148). Among the BaatonuBarubas of Northern Nigeria however, female Emirs convert their matrimonial houses into palaces after ascension into offices. These poverty ridden palaces are left uncared for by either the local government or state governments. The female kings themselves are so wretched to be able to carry out any meaningful renovation of their palaces.See pictures below:

V. Male Palace Female Palace



Figure 18 : Emir's Palace (Okuta)

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Figure 19 : Yongokogi Palace (Okuta)



Figure 20 : Emir's Palace (Gwanara)



Figure 21 : Magajia's Palace (Gwanara)



Figure 22 : Emir's Palace (Ilesha Baruba)



Figure 23 : Buyonkafo's Palace (Ilesha Baruba)

Their salary structure is also nothing to write home about. Most of them do not receive up to one tenths (1/10) of their male counterparts' salaries.According to the female king of Ikota, Obabinrin (female king) Celina Folorunsho, while presenting the grievances of women monarchs to Ooni of Ife, said most of them are paid stipends. She said the most highly paid among them earnsfive dollars ($5); some, two dollars ($2) and others a dollar ($) per month (Visit to Ooni of Ife). See picture below.These situationsare attributable to their lack of influence which sound western education brings.

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Figure 24 : Addressing the Ooni of Ife is the spokesperson of female traditional rulers, Oba Celina Folorunsho, Esemoe of Ikota when female traditional rulers in the Western part of Nigeria were presented to Ooni of Ife on the 12th of July 2008 (Olasupo,2010:144)

Colonial authorities contributed immensely to this relegation and total abandonment of female traditional rulers as primacy was given to male rulers only. Male rulers assisted the colonial authorities in this and, in fact, capitalized on it to appropriate female rulers' rights and benefits. This is to the extent that most of them (male rulers) deny their (Female rulers) existence, contrary to our research findings (Ogunmodede, 2008:22). This is particularly so in communities where gender balance in traditional ruler ship is part and parcel of their cultures. Gender balance, equality, equity and fairness in not only governance but all spheres of human endeavour, which United Nations is promoting today is thus a caricature or mimicry of this African tradition. Much as the colonialism and the greedy patriarchal leaders tried to obliterate this virtue of gender balance in governance, it survived the onslaught (Olasupo, 2010: 1).

VI. Conclusion

As part of my personal effort to call the attention of the Federal government to the serious neglect of women monarchs in the country despite proven evidences of their existence, I personally placed greeting advertisement on in the Compass newspaper of May 28, 2012, P 5; a personal cost of three hundred and fifty thousand naira (#350, 000.00) Find below, electronic copy of the said advert:

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