

WOMEN AND THE SPREAD OF ISLAM IN WEST AFRICA THEIR CHANGING ROLE IN A NORTH CAMEROONIAN TOWN¹

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Introduction

Many authors have discussed the spread of Islam in West Africa and its historical context. Yet it is remarkable that none of them have made any remarks about the way this process has affected the position of women, or how exactly women have become involved in this process. No distinction between the sexes is made. They speak of merchants who introduced Islam, and of Muslim clerks or political leaders who adopted the new faith, but did these groups include women as well as men?²

For this reason I agree with Robinson who pleads for a more sociological approach where it concerns the study of the spread of Islam. Thus, he argues, there will be more room to consider the way in which Islam was integrated in different societies, and how it was adopted to pre-Islamic social processes (Robinson 1985b). Such an approach outlines the individual persons and their practices that are involved. It is also a necessary step in order to highlight women's position within a new, Islamic environment.

I will first briefly describe the spread of Islam in North Cameroon, the area under consideration. Islam was the state religion of the Sokoto empire. This empire was founded in 1804. It was dominated by the Fulbe, an originally pastoral people, that had converted to Islam a long time before. With the advent of the Fulbe, North Cameroon became one of the provinces of the empire. The dominant religion in the area became Islam, and the language of the Fulbe, Fulfulde, became the *lingua*

¹ The history of Mokoto is partly based on oral accounts. Dates used in this paper were gathered during two periods of field-work: from December 1986 until June 1988, and from November 1989 until February 1990. The research was made possible by WOTRO, the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research in the Tropics, and by the Dept. of Cultural Anthropology, Utrecht University, and the University of Leiden. My topic was the Islamization of the Mafa: its effects on women and on the relations between the genders. I am indebted to one of my students, Ms. Koster, who brought to my attention the article of I. A. Ogunbiyi concerning Uthman dan Fodio's notions about the position of women in the Sokoto Empire.

² Clarke 1982, Greenberg 1946, Hiskett 1973, Kirk-Greene 1958, Last 1967, Levtzion 1988, Paques 1978, Smith 1960, Willis 1979.

franca Many famous *Mallumbe* (religious leaders),³ were and still are Fulbe. Thus the impact of Islam on the individual lives of people and, in this case, on the lives of women in Mokolo, can only be understood in connection with this Islamic state.

In public affairs the authority of Islam was widely respected (Stenning 1966:387). In this respect the ideas and concepts of Uthman dan Fodio, the founder of the Sokoto empire, about the orthodox Islamic state and its way of life, were a source of inspiration. In his writings he also gave his views on the position of women within the state and criticized their position within the harem.

In this article I want to focus on the influence of these historical events on the individual. I will thereby particularly discuss the changing position of women within this process. My specific area of research are the Mafa women in Mokolo, North Cameroon.

Spread of Islam in West Africa

People in North Cameroon are, as in most other parts of West Africa, Sunni Muslims. Religious experts play an important role in the community, as they preserve the Islamic truth. They were also very important in the spread of Islam in West Africa.⁴

West Africa's first contacts with Islam were made in the seventh and eighth centuries, initially through slave raids and gold trade. It is important to notice that it were the Berbers, and not the Arabs, who maintained these trade-routes through the Sahara. The desert and the Berbers formed a sort of barrier against Arab invasions into the *Bilad al Sudan*, the land of the Blacks, as it was called by the Arabs.⁵ Consequently, Islam spread south along different ways, and according to Robinson this has led to different interpretations and applications of Islam within different ethnic groups.⁶ Levtzion argues along the same line. Such a process, leading to an Africanisation of Islam, could explain the peaceful progression of the faith (Levtzion 1971:31).

Between 1000 and 1600 A.D., the majority of the people in West Africa who had converted to Islam derived from the ranks of the ruling elite, from the merchant class and from among the urban population. Islam made little impact on the life and

³ In French the word *Marabout* is commonly used, but this is not an indigenous term. The word for religious expert, *Mallam* in Arabic, is *Mallumjo* in the Fultulde speaking regions. The quality of these *Mallumbe* (plural) vary from real religious experts with students, to skilled persons in various magical practices.

⁴ Clarke 1982: 6.

⁵ Hogben and Kirk Greene 1966: 15, Levtzion 1971: 31, Robinson 1985b, Willis 1979.

⁶ Robinson 1985b: 1397, Nicolas 1971.

belief of the farmers, fishermen and the people in the rural areas in general.⁷ This picture still applies today, not the Mafa people who live in the country become Muslims, but those who come to live in the towns. In those early days however, many Muslim rulers, even though they surrounded themselves with Muslim judges, scholars and holy men, also paid heed to the philosophers and priests of the traditional religion (Levtzion 1988: 100).

As stated previously, the Islamisation of Cameroon is closely related to the spread of the Sokoto empire. This empire was founded by the Muslim reformer Uthman dan Fodio. He belonged to the Torodbe, who are related to the Tokolor, who in turn are related to the Fulbe. The Torodbe developed over the centuries into an important intellectual and religious force in West Africa. Originally the Fulbe, including the Torodbe, were concentrated in today's northern and eastern Senegal where they led a predominantly pastoral life. Later on some Fulbe groups settled in towns, gave up their pastoral life and mixed with other Muslims. From these groups came the most learned and respected stratum of Muslim religious leaders in West Africa.⁸

The way Islam spread as described by many authors has received criticism by Robinson. He underlines that an emphasis on the profoundness or 'purity' of religious practices caused less orthodox ideas and rituals to be considered as a phase in the development towards orthodox Islam. Consequently there was less attention for the integration of Islam within the different societies. Ethnic groups that had not converted to Islam, served as examples of the phase of *jahiliya*, the 'pre-Islamic ignorance'. Ethnic groups that had played a dominant role in the process of state formations, as for instance the Manding, and where Islam used to play an important role at court, served as examples of the syncretic phase. The groups which stood for an orthodox Islam and therefore played a dominant role in the *jihad's* the holy wars, were considered as the true propagators of Islam.

The Fulbe Torodbe serve as an example. While in the period before ca. 1600 A.D. the spread of Islam generally followed a peaceful line, afterwards some Muslim scholars sought religious and political authority and adopted militant means to achieve these ends. Thus in seventeenth century Senegambia the Torodbe had founded strong Muslim communities in areas in which Islam had not previously existed. In literature, those groups have been presented as the true propagators of Islam. Such an approach however, does not explain the place of Islam within the communities in question.

Clark 1982: 28ff. Levtzion 1988: 99.

* Willis 1978: 195. Clark 1982: 34. Azary 1976: 11. Spencer Trimmingham 1959.

It is also remarkable that none of the authors in their description of the spread of Islam in West Africa refer to women. Neither do they make any remarks about how exactly women became involved in this whole process. We know that Islam was often introduced by merchants, and that political leaders slowly adopted Islam, but we can hardly assume that it were women who came across the Sahara in search of gold or slaves and thereby influenced other women or that women as political leaders adopted Islam.

Islam as a religion is not only open to members of both sexes, but it also gives specific rules to men as well as women in order to give them their place in the Islamic community.

We know that women in the former Bornu and Hausa states did have important political and religious functions. Female functionaries ruled the female population; the queen had an important position and in the pre-Islamic Hausa rituals, the '*born* cults', women played a major role and served as intermediaries.⁹ How Islam affected these positions, with or without the consent of women, remains an open question.

It may be too easily assumed that women became Muslims simply by marrying men who were or had become Muslims. Historical events mark different waves of Islamisation in Mokolo and suggest otherwise. The information collected in the course of my own research indicates that women mostly converted on their own initiative, for various reasons.

Trimingham, the only author who briefly mentioned the role and position of women, in a footnote was of the opinion that women who convert to Islam tend to maintain their old religious traditions for a much longer period than men tend to do and hence women can be considered as being more conservative (Trimingham 1968: 47). This remark goes against my own findings. While, after marriage, men may adhere to their own religion, women sometimes embrace Islam at a later age and change their lifestyle drastically. If we join my arguments with Robinson's plea for a sociological approach, the conclusion is, that looking at the status of women within Islamic society must include an awareness of the fact that women within the different Islamic societies have different positions and that not all the customs and manners originate from Islamic rules. As Fahmy stated in 1909 in a remark on Arab societies:

Islam may seem to have aged in a revolutionary way by abolishing certain morals and customs and institutionalizing new ones, but nevertheless underneath the differences and oppositions, a great number of common features combine the

⁹ Nicolas 1975: 20; Barkow 1972: 326; Greenberg 1946; Nicolis 1975: 152.

continuity between Arab customs (or in this case Fulbe and Mafa customs) and Islamic institutions (Fahmī 1983 25)

This need not be in conflict with Islamic law, because in a society the existing *status quo* can be maintained as long as it is not in contradiction with Islamic law (Anderson 1954) In the next paragraph I will give a short description of the emergence of the Sokoto empire, which in due course would bring Islam to the region under concern.

Uthman dan Fodio the founder of the Sokoto empire

Clarke (1982 77) argues that due to relative political instability, commerce and slave-trade, the warrior-class, the ruling elite, and their opponents began to fight more effectively for power This started a process whereby the Muslims in the villages began to look at Muslim leaders among the Torodbe for political as well as religious guidance ¹⁰ The latter were prepared to defend and promote the interests of their followers by military *jihad* It is in this context that the *jihad*'s of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took place

Islam was emerging as a counter-tradition Previously it had been accommodationist, assimilationist and prepared to coexist peacefully with the non-Muslim tradition The Islamic educational system continued to expand and to produce large numbers of Muslim scholars, who became increasingly critical of the "mixed" Islam prevalent in government circles. Thus there were two trends: the waning influence of Islam in government circles and the emergence of a more radically-minded Muslim intellectual elite in Hausaland (Clarke 1982 98).

Uthman dan Fodio, in the early nineteenth century, made repeated attacks on 'venal *mallams*' who preached and taught Islam although inadequately trained. In his view it was vital for a Muslim teacher to understand the writings of the respected orthodox Muslim scholars in order to be able to give the correct interpretation on points of Islamic doctrine and ritual ¹¹

In Gobir, Uthman dan Fodio later reported, tension between the *ulama* and the political authorities increased While in the first half of the eighteenth century the town of Zamfara was still the strongest centre in Hausaland, this changed when Gobir rose to a position of dominance in the second half of the eighteenth century (Levtzion 1971 338)

Uthman dan Fodio's ideas and inspiration came from the writings of orthodox scholars such as al-Maghili, who fully supported the belief that in each century God

¹⁰ Clarke 1982 77, Levtzion 1971b 4

¹¹ Clarke 1982 101 Shagari and Boyd 1977

would send a reformer to renew the faith and eradicate injustice. This belief influenced his thinking, as did al-Maghili's militant stand against Muslims who mixed the Islamic faith with the indigenous religion. Uthman dan Fodio repeatedly reminded Muslims in clear, simple language of the correct orthodox Muslim position on matters such as inheritance, marriage, fasting, prayer, and alms giving, while pointing out the various incorrect practices existing in Hausaland.¹⁷

He and his successors set out to reform Islam in Hausaland, and extend it far and wide. What had begun in Gobir as a community of the faithful, ended in the establishment of an Islamic nation, as the former Hausa states were reformed into a confederation of Islamic states. One of the more significant changes brought about by the Muslim reformers was the setting up of an Islamic administration within a centralised state, with Sokoto as the main province. The Sultan of Sokoto became the Supreme Commander of all the Muslims in Hausaland, and he gave the *emir's* the task of administering the Caliphate at a provincial level. A chief *qadi* or Muslim judge was appointed to supervise the administration of justice based on Islamic principles. The chief minister, *wazir*, moreover, linked the rest of the emirates with Sokoto and acted as moderator in disputes within and between the emirates (Clarke 1982: 119).

In the educational sphere the reform movement achieved a good deal. Literacy in Arabic was spread over a much wider area. The reform movement also gave rise to a greater interest in and concern for the education of women, to the establishment of more Muslim schools and the training of Muslim teachers. By the end of the nineteenth century people continued to be inspired by Uthman dan Fodio's reform movement, which made Islam the state religion (Ogunbiyi 1969).

In one of his books, the *Ta'lim al Ikhwan* (Education of the Brethren), Uthman dan Fodio writes about non-Muslim religious beliefs and practices. He mentions and condemns as polytheistic the practice of venerating trees and rocks on which libations were poured or sacrifices carried out (Clarke 1982: 114). As precisely those practices characterize Mafa religion, it is time to raise the question as to how the Mafa became involved in the process of Islamization.

Spread of Islam among the Mafa

The Mafa, living in an almost impenetrable area, resisted Islam for a long time. It was only with the help of the Germans at the beginning of this century that the first Islamic Fulbe chief could exercise control over this area.¹⁸ This chief came from Madagali and had relations with the Sokoto empire. He founded a centre in Mokolo,

¹⁷ Levtzion 1971. Clarke 1982. Ogunbiyi 1969.

¹⁸ Njeumi 1978. Mohammadou 1988.

bringing a Muslim elite with him. From this time onwards, Islam spread among the Mafa. The following story was told by a woman. It needs to be situated around 1910, Maama Maimouna tells us:

When I was eight years old, Hamman Yadjɪ (the *Lamido* [chief] from Madagali, who claimed the Mokolo plains as his territory), took us. We were all caught: my little sister, my big brother, my little brother and myself. We used to be five in the house. We were all taken by the *Lamido*. They brought us to his house in Madagali – that became English territory afterwards – and then they sold everybody. I didn't know much, I was still too small. But my big brother, before I went to sleep, had bent his head down and he had cried, cried, cried. I asked him: 'Why are you crying like that?' He asked me in return: 'Where are they going to take us now? Is it not true that they are going to sell us?' He had been right, they did sell him. But, because I had fallen asleep, the chief had said: 'Leave her!', but all the others were sold in Kano. When I woke up, my sister and brother had gone and all the other people from our village as well. When I noticed that, I cried too.

So I stayed and worked with the *Lamido*, until he gave me to his child. She was just a little older than I was. She was going to get married. That is how they do it in Fulbe customs, you see. If the eldest girl is going to get married, the one who is just a little bit younger, goes with her to stay with her. While I was staying in her house there came a man to ask my hand in marriage.

I had just started to have my periods. I had started praying long before. Growing up with the Fulbe, I learned to pray like the Fulbe. First I was still too small, but when I had grown a little older I had said to myself: "I better start praying now!" Now the man who came to ask me to marry him was a Mafa from Mofele. He was to become the father of my children. I only married once in my life. I stayed with him until he died. When we were still staying in Nigeria, I gave birth to one child, our first son.

This story shows that the Fulbe, who instigated the process of Islamization, tried to dominate the Mafa area. The first contact with Islam was through slave raids, that remain awful reminders of subjection, up till the present day. Afterwards, when the English had succeeded the Germans, former slaves were allowed to return. This woman and her husband settled in Mokolo in the Islamic community, where she and the rest of the family are still living today. Later on the daughter of this woman was to marry the son of the *Lamido* of Madagali, the one who had taken her as a slave. This woman grew up in the household of the *Lamido*, so from an early age she learned to follow the customs and rules of an Islamic household. There are many examples like this.

The history of the spread of Islam among the Mafa can be divided into several stages: at first the captured and freed slaves who had become Muslims while in

slavery, like the woman who spoke above, came back to their original area. They preferred to live in the Islamic communities in Mokolo after their return. This first wave of Islamization, during World War I, is largely the same for women and men. The second wave came when Mokolo was acknowledged as a political centre, with a number of villages under its jurisdiction. This attracted converted people from other regions, from Fulbe as well as from other ethnic groups. The Muslim community in town grew slowly. This also attracted Mafa, especially those whose relatives already lived in town. Mafa children - boys as well as girls - often came to live with Islamic families.

One day people from another clan came along and killed my father. My mother, a leper, had died already. My brother and I we ran away. A white person caught us. His name was Lavergne. He brought us to the *Lamido* of Mokolo, who was a Fulbe, this was 35 years ago. The *Lamido* saw that we were still small kids, he raised us and we started to pray with his own children. When I grew up I went back to the land of my father to cultivate it, but I always remained Muslim.

During periods of famine, the Mafa sometimes traded their children (except the first-born son and the Benjamin) for food (Martin 1970). But even in normal times Mafa youngsters were attracted to the Islamic community in town. They mostly came to work and to 'find' some money. Boys would come at an early age and start to work in a family - like the slaves before. If they wanted to continue work in town, they had to convert to Islam. Becoming a Christian was not yet an alternative. However, this was an option open to boys, and rare among girls. Both examples - adoption and labour migration - are still common nowadays.

After independence, Cameroon had an Islamic president. For the Islamic North this meant that the administrative centres formed a centre of employment for Islamic people. To get a job in these centres or to start a business on the market, one practically had to be a Muslim. This can be called the third wave of Islamization. For men the job discrimination became an important reason to adopt Islam. If they converted, they mostly did so at a younger age, while in high school or when they came to work in town and stayed with Islamic families before their marriage. Women did not have this motive for conversion to Islam. This stage of Islamization stopped after 1984, when Cameroon got a new President and many politicians were transferred. The influence of the Islamic community decreased. Yet women still continue to become Muslims.

During my survey and in the life histories, I encountered hardly any examples of men who had become Muslims at a later age. In contrast, many women 'came down from the mountains' after one or several marriages. I think it rather

remarkable that women sometimes change their lifestyle so drastically at a later age, while men are inclined to convert while young. They, once married, stick to their own religion and condemn their daughters when they change their religion. Elsewhere I argued that this difference in the process of conversion is due to the division of labour within the traditional Mafa religion (Van Santen 1993). A Mafa man tells us:

If we have a daughter who marries a Fulbe (he means a Muslim), we just do not mention it, we pretend she is not getting married, we pretend she does not exist any more. We can curse her and say she will never set foot in the house any more, but then perhaps she may come secretly and curse her father and then we may die. So finally she will come to visit, but only after I have calmed down my anger. But will her husband come to help me on my fields, or with other things? He is a good for nothing.

Uthman dan Fodio's statements on the position of women

After their conversion the Mafa integrate in the Muslim community, which in Mokolo has adjusted to Fulbe as well as Mafa customs. It is important to note what Uthman dan Fodio has said about the position of women. Uthman dan Fodio's writings deal with many aspects of the status of the Muslim woman from the day she reaches puberty until her death (Ogunbiyi 1969: 44-54). His reforms, which, in towns at least, were widely applied, led to the withdrawal of women from most aspects of public life after their marriage. Ogunbiyi groups Uthman dan Fodio's writings on the status of women into several broad categories, dealing with the most important aspects of their social life, legal rights, religious obligations and education.

On marriage and sexual intercourse

Uthman dan Fodio stressed the obligation to marry and stated that no obstacles should be put in the way of girls to get married. This was probably a reaction to the fact that in the former Hausa states, women with official political functions were not expected to be married. The Islamic provision that women as well as men have a right to a sexual life, but only within marriage, was stressed.

Uthman dan Fodio also held the opinion that any dowry agreed upon by the prospective husband and the woman's guardian, *wali*, belonged to her alone and should be given to her. This complied with the Islamic rule on dowry, but not with Fulbe or Mafa custom.

Married women's freedom of movement

In Uthman dan Fodio's view, the Koran requires that women should be kept in seclusion within the house. He discussed the various circumstances under which a

woman might leave her marital home. Some of them concern religious duties: to go to the mosque, to Friday prayers, to festival or rain prayers, to burial or marriage ceremonials, on pilgrimage, to the market, and in search for knowledge.

Man's obligation to provide for his wife's needs

A man has the obligation to provide for his wife's needs. Uthman dan Fodio said:

Another practice is that of men who remain at home while their wives go to the market where they struggle and rub shoulders with men. This is a forbidden innovation and it is an imitation of Europeans.

A husband's legal rights over his wife

Concerning recalcitrant women, he repeated the counsel mentioned in the Koran which advises abstention from sexual intercourse and beating one's wife. Abstention, however, should not last longer than one month and the beating should not be so severe as to cause her any lasting physical harm.

Women's legal rights

Uthman dan Fodio stated that if a judge had cases involving women, he should set aside certain days for women's cases.

Pilgrimage

Uthman dan Fodio would not object to a woman going on pilgrimage, but he mentions the reservation of some Muslim scholars, who considered old women more eligible for pilgrimage than young ones.

Women's right to be educated

The most outstanding reform advocated by Uthman dan Fodio was the education of women. He opposed the *ulama* class for considering it more important to impart knowledge to their students than to teach their household. They treat their wives, daughters and slaves like household implements which are used until they are broken and then thrown onto the rubbish heap.

He also stated that a woman ought to be allowed to go out in search of knowledge if her husband could not teach her. Uthman dan Fodio did not separate theory from practice concerning the education of women. In his family the learning of five generations of women can be traced. They wrote in three languages and they focused among other things on the defence of the Caliphate that was under attack after Uthman dan Fodio's death, and on education and teaching. They taught and preach

ed, to men as well as women¹⁵ Uthman dan Fodio not only advocated religious education for women but also emphasised the importance of giving them secular instructions, he stressed the need for them to be properly educated on the Islamic rules regulating business dealings

The changes due to conversion

Let us consider the motivation of one particular Mafa woman, named Maimouna, to convert, and illustrate a few of the changes that took place following this conversion. About the period that she was married 'in the mountains' and still performed her sacrifices, she relates

I had two children, they both died. My husband did not give me food, nor proper clothes. And I suffered because of the loss of my children. When the last one died at the age of three, I sent for my husband, who was away. He ordered me to leave the house. Thereupon my father-in-law returned me to my father. Now my children had died and my husband had sent me away. I was furious. So then I left and went to the mountains near Madagali. I went there, not knowing anybody. On the road there are often thieves and bandits, who easily kill people. Yet I did go. I said to myself 'Well, what does it really matter if they kill me, perhaps it is even better to die, but if I can continue to live, very well, all right, so it be'

I met another woman. We stayed together in a village called "Loumsi", in Nigeria.

At first I did not speak Fulfulde in the mountains. Even asking for water 'please give me water', I could not say. I stayed with this woman in Nigeria and learned to speak the language in three months. In those months I also learned to prepare the food like the Fulbe do and to wash the dishes like the Fulbe do. When I had stayed with her for two months, there came a man who wanted to marry me. I became a Muslim, my small jar to do the sacrifices in I had left in the mountains.

I went to a *Marabout*, he gave me another name and he taught me how I should study the Koran and I learned to read. Little by little, like children at school I learned. From that day on I prayed five times a day, but together with somebody else so that I could observe whether I did it rightly.

But you know, the God of the Muslims, the God of the Mafa, the God of the Christians, isn't it finally the same God? It is only the name that differs. Pray they all do. The Mafa, the Muslims and the Christians. From the moment I left my husband in the mountains, I never prepared the millet beer any more.

In former days, when I was still living in the mountains, I could never have guessed that one day I would be a Muslim myself. If I saw them pray, I always

thought they did sort of a funny act. If I saw the women disappear behind their houses to go to the latrine, and to wash themselves, I always said mockingly: 'Why do they need to wash their assholes?'

And the men... I could not stop insulting them 'Ooohsee them passing by with their circumcised pricks'.... And I laughed at them..

The actual changes we can deduce from her story are: Change of *name*, change in *language*, change in *praying habits*, change in *sanitary* habits and a change in *education*, as she moved from illiteracy to literacy when she started to read Arabic.

However, there are many more changes to be noticed: As soon as a person has converted, Mafa *funerals and their way of mourning* are abandoned and people are buried in the Islamic cemetery before sunset. In Mafa tradition people mourn for many days during which the drums are played and people sing and dance in honour of the dead. A pot for the dead person is constructed to fulfil the duties towards him or her. After conversion people will attend the funeral of relatives, but, as they say, "they no longer dance". They will no longer perform the sacrifices for their dead relatives and ancestors.

People change their *marriage system*: The Mafa are exogamous, which means that it is strictly forbidden to marry a person from the paternal clan or the maternal clan (the latter back to the fourth generation). The Fulbe are endogamous with a preference for cross-cousin marriage. The Mafa after Islamization do not hold on to their clan system, but they do not take over the cross-cousin marriage either. They often will marry Muslim people from other regions and from other ethnic groups.

They change their *brideprice system*. With the Mafa, payment of the brideprice is exclusively an affair of the men. The male relatives of the future husband negotiate with the father of the bride and it is he who will get the brideprice. When a woman leaves her husband, the latter will start negotiating with her father and/or the new husband to receive the money back. Women not only know nothing about it but do not care about it either. The Fulbe know a complicated exchange system. Here the adjustment of local customs to Islam is clear. They not only know the gift to the bride which the Koran prescribes; in fact this is only a small part of the totality of goods and things that move from the family of the groom to the bride and vice versa. There are also gifts for the parents and family of the bride and for the parents and family of the groom. This is a pre-Islamic Fulbe custom that persisted after Fulbe conversion to Islam. The Mafa, when they convert to Islam, become part of a Muslim, partly Fulbe community, so they do take over customs - like the above mentioned exchange system - that are originally Fulbe.

Men's contribution to the gift exchange system is limited. It is nearly all a women's affair. This means that women need to accumulate capital, hence also their

economic occupations tend to change the Mafa are farmers and their women grow millet (their staple crop), peanuts, sesame, beans and all sorts of vegetables. The fruits of their labour they add to what the family has in stock - although each wife has her own granary - or to the family budget. Muslim women hardly cultivate any more, and if they do they can keep the profits for their own needs. In Mokolo commerce the buying, processing and selling of products is exclusively done by Muslim women.

We may wonder how they combine these economic activities with the Islamic ideas about seclusion. We must keep in mind that women produce many goods that can be sold from the house. Products that need to be sold in the market or in the street are often sold by children from the household, or non-Muslim Mafa 'boys', who came to town to earn some money. Yet there are also many Islamic Mafa women who earn some money by smuggling. In that case they cross the border themselves. Muslim Fulbe women would never do so. In the first place because many of them still own cattle they can sell to raise money for the gifts, but also because they observe the Islamic custom of seclusion more strictly. It is certainly due to the fact that Mafa women more easily ignore it that they can accumulate the necessary capital (Van Santen 1993a, 1993b).

Mafa women easily *divorce* on their own initiative, contrary to the woman in our story. They simply move on to the next husband. Converted women in Mokolo also divorce quite easily. Yet they need the agreement of their husbands, if they take the initiative. Their argument concerning this matter is clear: the Koran prescribes that it is only the man who can repudiate his wife.

The *inheritance* system also changes. Mafa women do not inherit at all: they are a floating population, moving from one man's place (their father's) to other men's places (their husbands). They are very much aware that this changes after they become Muslims.

At the same time, within the larger changes old features can be traced back, from the Mafa as well as from the Fulbe people. In Mafa religion, the jar is very important. Sacrifices to one personal god, to other less important gods, and to the ancestors are made in it. Also the afterbirth of a child is buried in a jar. If the child falls ill, sacrifices can be performed on the burial place of this jar. The Muslim community in Mokolo kept the habit of burying the afterbirth in a jar, although they no longer sacrifice. A Muslim woman whose family converted two generations ago, told me that everybody in the Muslim community does so. She never connected it with Mafa religion. She said 'that is how we Muslims do things'. Yet another Muslim woman, Fulbe, born in the plains and now living in Mokolo, told me afterwards: 'I did not want to say it in front of her, but it is only here in Mokolo that they know this habit, we Fulbe women never did so.'

Also the custom to cut the umbilical cord of boys with an iron knife or a piece of wild grass and that of girls with a stalk of millet can be traced back in the symbolic system of the Mafa. People converted to Islam hold on to this habit, not knowing that it concerns features from a former ethnic identity.

Fulbe women return to their parents' home when seven months pregnant with their first child, to give birth in their father's house with their mother next to them. They will stay there for half a year or a year. This is a Fulbe custom and has nothing to do with their being Muslims. Mafa women in the process of conversion took over many Fulbe habits, but could not take over this custom as they could not return to their mother's place if the latter was not a Muslim. Thus in Mokolo they do not know this custom, not even if the entire family consists of Muslims.

We gave some examples of adaptation of Islam to local customs people themselves are no longer aware of. Most intriguingly I found the women who recently converted and who are conscious of their new and old religious and social system. I want to underline this with the words of a woman who converted after several marriages 'in the mountains'. Proof of the mentioned awareness is not only her story but also the fact that it is she herself who categorized nearly all the subjects. [Not to interfere with this beautiful story I will comment on it afterwards.]

Maama Fatima (grandmother of Fatima) tells us about her own life

Me, Daada Reinout (mother of Reinout, my son), I like to trade to find some money, I will buy my own piece of land and I will build my own house there. And then I also like to have a person beside me with whom I can talk. (She means a husband)

Concerning her living circumstances

This is my husband's house. There are three of us here, three wives I mean, one is pregnant, then there is still another one, and then there is me. But I still like to have a piece of land of my own where I personally build a house, and when one day I will no longer be alive, my daughter, the mother of Fatima (Daada Fatima), can take it together with my trade, and then if one day she does no longer get along with her husband, she can live in that house. There are other women like me, who built their own house to let it per month to another person. I have been living with my present husband for two months now. With my last husband I lived behind the water tower, but then we divorced and I moved into another house by myself, there, where you saw me before. Then I met my present husband, he married me and I came over here. Now if I find money (she means if I have earned enough money), I will build my own house and

somebody can live there for the time being, and if one day my husband will throw me out then I will live in that house

Concerning her life history

I had several husbands. The first one had been chosen for me by my father. It was the father of Daada Fatima (her daughter). I had two children with him and then I left. I married another person. We stayed together for twelve years without having children. Then I left him. People told me that it was my first husband who caused this (her sterility during this period). I became a Muslim and had two more husbands. I was born in Mokola (next to Mokolo). My father's clan is Moulai. I do not know my mother's clan any more. Perhaps my big brother knows. I never knew my mother, She died when I was still very little. When I married for the first time I already had my periods. It went as follows. One day my father said to me 'You will go away to be married'. I asked him 'where?'. At that man's place, he replied. I told him that I did not want to go. He took a branch and hit me and then they took me to that man's place. I did not stay with the father of my husband (as is usual with the Mafa, to learn from the mother in law), I directly went to my husband's place. He had already one other wife. I stayed with him for eight years. When I was with this husband I worked in the fields and harvested, I raised chickens, I cut wood, I fetched water, all those things a Mafa woman does. I did my sacrifice in my own personal jar, I prepared the millet beer, and I knew all the things a Mafa-woman was supposed to know. After eight years I left my husband, when he made me suffer. When my father saw this he said to him 'It was me who gave you my daughter and now you make her suffer. Give me back my daughter'. I went back to live with my father.

Concerning the brideprice of the Mafa

My father gave back the brideprice, but my husband lied and raised the brideprice. He had given only six goats and he said afterwards it concerned ten goats. In those days money was not used yet. Then I married the other husband and I stayed with him for twelve years without having any children. I left, because I did not have them. To him we did not pay back the brideprice.

Concerning magic

My first husband had said 'She will only get more children if she returns to me. If not she will never have children any more'. So I wanted to return to my first husband but my father said 'He lied and raised the brideprice, so I do not want you to return to him. There are all sorts of methods to cause sterility like this. You can take the hair of a person, or dirty clothes. That you mix with the millet, with the peanuts, with the goat fat, with the chicken one eats. Then if you eat it, you do not get any more children. I do not think that here in town they do that kind of things, although. Even after my first husband died I still did not get any children. Both women and men can do those things.

Concerning the actual process of conversion

So after I left my second husband I became a Muslim. They brought me to the Marabout. With the clothes I was wearing at that time I left the house. I would not return any more in those clothes because I knew that when the Marabout washed me, he would take those old clothes and would give me new ones. He showed me how I should wash my hands and feet, how I should pray and how I should wash my face, how I should put water into my mouth twice and then start praying—that's all. I was a Muslim.

Concerning the reasons of conversion

When I left to return to my first husband, my brother stopped me. He said 'You cannot go back to him, because he lied and raised the brideprice.' Then I said 'Fine, if it is like that, I will become a Muslim and that way none of you can influence me any more.'

Concerning the view of the here-after

If you are a Muslim they do not have any influence any more. Because you see if you were a Mafa and became a Muslim and let the Mafa influence you and go back to them again, then, when you die, you will no longer be with the Mafa, with the people of the mountains (because you converted to Islam), but you will not be with the Muslims either (because you did not completely follow their way), you will remain somewhere in the middle, you will be wandering around, in your grave. It is like it is now: if Mafa women are together to talk and a Muslim woman goes up to them, they will say 'But you are a Muslim woman, what brings you to us?' And the Muslim women will say the same thing to a Mafa woman.

Concerning the relations between Mafa and non Mafa women

A Mafa woman who knows God can stay with another Mafa woman. They can eat together (if it has not been prepared by a non-Muslim woman), but they cannot sit or sleep on the same mat. If a Mafa woman takes the mat of a Muslim woman, the Muslim woman won't be able to use it any more for praying. If my eldest brother would die now (he is still doing his sacrifices), then I will go to his funeral with the other Muslim-women. They give us a special mat to sit on. All the Muslim women that will come to mourn, will sit on that mat. We get special water that is separated from the water other people drink, we will not eat their food, we will not drink their water. We will not sing, we will not dance, we will only pray for the one who is dead and that is all. It is not difficult, this change in life.

My non-Muslim brothers are still alive and when I have money, I buy clothes or I prepare something nice to eat and I bring it to them. If their children come up to me, I give them money, but I cannot go to my brothers and stay with them for a couple of days, because I cannot stay overnight. I wouldn't know if my father would have agreed—he had already died when I became a Muslim. My

big brother said he did not care, I could choose my own religion, it wouldn't make any difference to him if he had a sister with another religion

Concerning her actions after her decision to change religion

When I wanted to convert I stayed with another member of my family who lived in town, who was already a Muslim. There they told me 'It is better to become a Muslim'. In the same way a Mafa girl can come to live with me if she wants to convert. Then I go to the *Mallumjo* to tell him and then he will take the proper steps. It was my own will to convert. You see I didn't have any more children. They always told me to do such and such sacrifice. Everybody came to eat with me because of this sacrifice, every time they told me to prepare food, to prepare millet-beer, to cook a chicken or goat. Finally I told myself it is better to leave all the sacrifices behind me and become a Muslim. Then I can pray to Allah. You see, the Mafa call their God *Jigile*, the Muslims call him Allah. It is always the same God, but instead of doing a sacrifice, if one has become Muslim, one prays.

Concerning changes in life-style

Yes, I do not drink any more, but some new Muslims still drink the millet-beer. It is better to leave it though. I used to dance, I still know it a bit, but most of it I have forgotten. We can sing now to enjoy ourselves, but drinking and singing together we can't do any more. I do not want it any more either.

Concerning changes in religion

My personal jar I have thrown away. You see my 'jar' now is to pray five times a day like the others do. No, I never thought that my forefathers would get angry, they do not live any more do they? I cannot write or read in Arabic, the *Mallumjo* has only taught me to pray. Of course, if I would have the time I could always learn how to read and write, but you see, we as women, we are always very occupied, I do not find the time. Of course there are also men who are always busy and occupied. But for a *Mallumjo*, it is his work to read and write and to teach the Koran to the children and all the others who want to learn. Those who have enough money can take a *Mallumjo* only for their own children and at the end of the month give some money.

Concerning community life

There are many things that have changed since I became a Muslim. You see in the mountains if you do not have friends or relatives and you die, there is nobody to take care of you. Here in town, even if you do not have friends or a husband, if they see that you pray every day, your neighbours or other people can bury you. So being a Muslim is better.

Change in the inheritance system:

My daughter (who was raised with her first husband) did not become a Muslim because I told her so, but she decided herself. She wanted to become like me. You see how things arrange themselves well, because when I die and my daughter would still be in the mountains, they would not give her anything of me, and I think that is bad (she means: she would not inherit). But now, as she also is a Muslim she can take all that belongs to me. If, for example, I have a house, she will be able to take it over, with all my other belongings and the business I have. With the Mafa, if a person does not have children, the family will take it, otherwise the children will share it, but only the boys, not the girls. I think that is not good. Wasn't the father who died, the father of the girl as well? Muslims share between boys and girls.

Concerning the relation between husband and wife:

It was ten years ago that I became a Muslim. I never stayed longer than three months without a husband, so before the present husband I had another one. But I divorced him and I married this one. Because if a man tells you: 'I no longer love you, leave this house' and you wait for three months and ten days, you can remarry again. It is not like that with the Mafa, where the husband tells his wife to leave and she stays and afterwards, when he has calmed down she can stay. With the Muslims it is better. You see there are girls who do not like the man they are married to. First he says: 'I love you', if after some days he says: 'I no longer love you', she is happy to leave.

If a man has two wives and if one of them prepares the food, the man cannot stay and talk with the other woman who did not. He can only talk to the one who made the meal. But the next day he will go to the room of the other wife who will be preparing the food. If a man has his own room, the woman will go to his room to spend the night. If he does not have a room of his own, he sleeps with the woman in her room. If the man has more wives, he gives the key of his room to the wife that prepares the meal that day, so that she can sweep the room and wait for him there. With the Mafa, the man sleeps with the wife he likes most, even if she has not prepared the meal that day. With the Muslims though, if your husband would never sleep with you any more, your heart would not like it. Everybody knows this rule: If my husband has slept with me tonight, he will not enter my room the next day. He only greets me. If he would do otherwise, the other woman would become jealous. If the other wife prepares the food today, and I would start a discussion with my husband, she would get angry and that may be the start of a serious argument, because you talked to the husband who was for the other wife that day. Even if somebody of my family came today to visit him, I could not speak to him if it is not my turn.

Concerning the change in brideprice system

I had two husbands since I became a Muslim, but I did not have any more children and now I am too old. And as I have my grandchildren, I can always stay next to them (they live around the corner). When my daughter married, her father, my first husband, was still alive. They gave him money as a brideprice, so he could buy what he wanted for himself. As he lived in the mountains, he wanted money in return for his daughter, but he gave her nothing. So it was me who gave her the household utensils and the bed. So did the other members of the family, where I stayed when I became a Muslim. They also gave her presents. They consider themselves as her family, because we stayed with them in the past. For example, if she, my daughter, would get angry with her husband and leave him, she would go to them. If her own father would still have been alive, she could have gone to him, in the mountains, but then he still would not have been able to deal with things like the Fulbe do, so it would always have been better if she went to Muslim relatives in town.

The father of my daughter absolutely did not like it when he heard she wanted to become a Muslim. He said 'Fine, when she becomes a Muslim I want a lot, a lot of money for her'. That wasn't very nice, because you see, if he would have been a Muslim himself, he would have been the one who had to give her money and other things so that she could get married.

Concerning the change in economic activities

I started to trade when I came to live in town. I no longer prepared the millet beer as I did before, so I said to myself 'It is better to start trading, because you need some money'. The Mafa-women can prepare millet-beer. With the Muslim, if the wife does not make peanut oil, or beignets of bean-flour, then there is not much more left for her to do than trading. Mafa women can do other things. Since I am a Muslim I never work in the field any more. I have a Muslim husband and the religion says it is not good for a woman to do such work. My husband also buys the water, so we do not have to fetch it ourselves. We as women, we only prepare the food. He does not want us to leave to fetch water. There are other Muslim men, though, who leave it to their wives to fetch the water. But that is not good, somewhere there is something they did not understand very well.

Ideology and practice in the Muslim community

When situated in a historical context Islamization in this area is part of a cultural change embedded in the history of the area. The story above indicates that at the level of the individual, this process is expressed as a transition from one state of affairs to another.¹⁵ Maama Fatima's life has changed drastically. Several times

¹⁵ Peel 1990

Maama Fatima underlined the wish to be economically independent from her husband. In the Islamic community everybody subscribes to the rule – and Uthman dan Fodio clearly did so as well – that a husband should provide for his wives and his household. All the same, most women have their own business because they need money to contribute to the bridewealth of their own daughters and those of their friends and relatives. So in contrast with the Mafa and depending on the economic situation of their husbands, they can keep the money they earn themselves.

In her life history Maama Fatima refers to her father's clan. The Mafa are divided into clans and are exogamous, which means that one cannot marry another person from the father's clan, nor the mother's clan back to the fourth generation. Muslim Mafa remember their original clan, back to the second generation. Maama Fatima has already forgotten her mother's clan's name.

Concerning the dowry obligations for her daughter she remarked that the family members who had already converted helped her out. My research indicates that such was and is a general rule in the process of islamization: the Islamic community helps out to fulfil the prescribed duties.

She also referred to the magic practices of the Mafa. There seem to be large differences between the Mafa and the Islamic population. The Mafa have their specialists to turn to in times of disasters. Those will advise them concerning the necessary sacrifices to prevent or cure illnesses. The Fulbe in such cases use Koran texts and amulets. Many people will turn to the *Mallumbe* for help. It has been suggested that Islam was able to spread in West Africa because of the new magic it used, like amulets.¹⁶

In the case of Maama Fatima it is clear that Islam was an alternative way to pray and that she hoped it would help her to cure her sterility. Converted Mafa women occasionally return to traditional healers. Fulbe people will never do so. If a sacrifice is advised, they can ask a non Islamic relative. These practices were very much condemned by Uthman dan Fodio. Many *Mallumbe* also know all sorts of 'black magic', using, for instance, Koran texts or resorting to other practices, which were equally condemned by Uthman dan Fodio.

Her way of referring to the here-after is characteristic for converted Mafa. In the Mafa religious system, when people die, they continue to live beneath the surface of the earth in the same way as on earth. There they die again, entering again a new life. This happens up to five times. Each time they descend deeper into the earth, until they finally reach the red earth. The prospect of an everlasting live in paradise was mentioned on several occasions as a reason to become Muslim. Her reference to 'the wandering in the middle', must be looked at from this point of view. A

¹⁶ I. Lutzon 1971: 333. Mommersteeg 1988.

popular notion among the Muslim population is that there are three heavens: one for the people with 'traditional' religions, one for the Christians, and one heaven for the 'true religious people', the Muslims. If you do not completely follow the rules of your religion you do not enter any of these heavens. Yet instead of the word 'heaven' she uses the word 'grave', which can be derived from the Mafa world view that people disappear underneath the earth in their grave after death.

It is clear from Maama Fatima's as well as Maimouna's pronouncements that she considers Allah to be the same God as *Jigile*, the God of the Mafa, only the way of praying changes. First there were the sacrifices in the jar, now you have to bend down five times a day.

Her reference to the education system she stresses that she is too old to learn - needs some explanation, especially in the light of the importance Uthman dan Fodio' attached to the education of women. All the children from the Muslim community in Mokolo - girls as well as boys - receive religious education. They also go to secular schools. Among the Mafa in the mountains the percentage of girls that go to school is much lower than that of boys. It is remarkable that she mentions the fact that a wealthy person can afford a *Mallumjo* for his own children. This resembles Uthman dan Fodio's invective against the *ulama* class. It was quite normal to find a *Mallumjo* teaching the children and even women of a particular household. These *Mallumbe* could also be women.

The advantage of being part of the Islam community is clearly put forward. This fact was mentioned by many women. It can be seen in the light of the history of the spreading of Islam. Islamic communities were founded in different regions and had their attraction on the surrounding population. A very important point is that people in the Islamic community take better care of their 'old and lonely neighbours' than the individualistic Mafa, whose compounds are built far apart.

Referring to the inheritance system, she does not mention the Islamic stipulation that girls receive half the share of boys. With the Mafa, girls do not inherit at all. Perhaps the fact that girls could inherit was already such a revolutionary element, that she overlooked that fact. Maybe she simply did not know.

Evident in her description of Muslim family life is the rule that a man needs to satisfy his wives equally, as well as Uthman dan Fodio's statements that a man needs to provide for his wives' needs. She considers this an advantage compared to the treatment among the Mafa, where women are much more dependent on the husband's tastes and preferences.

Her final reference 'somewhere, there is something they did not understand well' is noteworthy too. Not only that - it is a subtle way of saying that not all the Muslim men take care of their wives as they should. Most Muslim men will buy water from 'boys' who fetch it for money, but some - mostly Muslim Mafa - men do send out their women to fetch the water. This was considered a very bad habit.

Fulbe men underlined the fact that a "true" man should never drink the water his wife has fetched nor eat the food his wife had cultivated, although it very much depended on the economic situation of the particular household whether they could live up to this ideology

The points which the women did not mention in their stories are the ritual impurity and women's access to justice. All women believe that they are ritually unclean after giving birth and during their menstruation, and they will pray nor fast. Many women - Fulbe as well as converted women - do make up afterwards.

Concerning women's access to justice, no special days were set aside in Mokolo secular court for women, but most women easily found their way into court. Maimouna, the first woman who told her story, serves as an example.

After I left my second Islamic husband in Nigeria, I came back to Mokolo and married another Muslim man. As he had his fields, I cultivated peanuts. I sold them for Cfa 10,000 (\$50). With that money I bought a sheep, which I left with another woman when I went back to Nigeria to pay a visit. When I came back after two months the sheep had died. The woman said that it wanted to die, so they had slaughtered it and sold the meat. The woman used the money for her own needs. She said I had to wait till the next rainy season. Then she would grow crops, sell the products and give me back my money. I became very angry, I borrowed Cfa 2,000 from a Muslim member of my family and I brought my case into court. The judge decided in my favour. The woman had to pay back the money immediately, which she couldn't, so little by little she paid me and with that money I started to trade.

Conclusion

The subject of this article has been the changing situation of Mafa women in Mokolo following their conversion to Islam. Because of historical events, Islam developed into a valid alternative for Mafa people in North Cameroon. With the adoption of Islam the people underwent a radical change in life style. Mafa as an ethnic marker came to be replaced by Islam as a religious marker. My argument is that women should not be excluded from the study of conversion. For that reason I agree with a more sociological approach - following Robinson's arguments - in which the integration of Islam within society becomes more evident. Did this approach help us to clarify women's practices and involvement in the process of Islamization? The approach certainly provides us with a more thorough understanding of the influence of state ideology on individual lives. As individuals are divided into women and men, who each have different positions in 'traditional' society and thus have different interests and motives that may be contradictory to those of the other sex, the story of Mafa women's conversion came into the picture. We learned that they did not passively follow their men folk, as seem to be implicitly taken for granted in

the existing literature. We discovered by listening to their individual stories, that the women adopted Islam on their own initiative.

The conclusion is reached that by separating the process of conversion by women from that by men, justice is done to the women concerned. It also adds to a better understanding of the diversity of women's position within Islam. A more profound analysis of the exact implications for women and the underlying motives of women to convert to Islam could not be made in such a short article. They can be found elsewhere (Van Santen 1993a).

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