

The Sheikh



He sat, cross-legged on his brass four-poster bed. One of his disciples knelt in front of him and also in front of him, prostrate on the floor mat, was the supplicant whose gifts of soda and dry goods were piled behind him in the corner. The supplicant was actually a delegate from the central government pleading for help in an upcoming campaign. "Would his greatness, his holiness support the effort... so important for the people of Senegal?"

We sat on the edges of the rooms watching but unobserved because women had no part in negotiations or deals, at least not openly. We were the younger wives with no children, the slaves and concubines, a sister and a visiting female student of the Koran come to study with the Sheikh (me). We were unimportant, but so very aware of all that passed in that room as parades of people came loaded with gifts to try and get his support. I was amazed and bemused by all I saw.... I knew the Sheikh spoke French, Wolof and other indigenous languages but he chose to speak in Arabic, the language of his religion. He was a great scholar and a prolific author of religious books and texts in Arabic. His influence crossed many national boundaries moving from Senegal through the Western part of Northern Nigeria. All the governments whose territory he crossed were respectful of him and sought his support for any campaign they chose to begin. They knew, should the Sheikh oppose it, his disciples would not participate. Even delegates from European governments came, begging for his support in the different deals they were trying to negotiate.

We, the chosen women, slept in the room adjoining his chamber separated from it by a hanging cloth. As a foreign woman alone, the Sheikh had insisted I join his entourage: it was not safe for a young woman to be by herself in the village. So there I was for several weeks. At night, the youngest wife would go back and forth to his bedroom and eventually would come to sit next to me, proudly showing off a beautiful pair of earrings or some other thing he had given her. Habiba was 17 and had actually been in a French secondary school when her parents negotiated her marriage with the Sheikh for his help in acquiring more land. At first I had been shocked (for he was 70) but had come to realize that she was happy. She was proud to be for the moment the first among his 200 wives. Also she would accompany him to Mecca on this year's annual trip. She loved to parade through the peanut fields where other followers, slaves and the Senegalese equivalent of serfs tilled his land, weeded and then gathered the peanuts when they were ripe. At night Habiba slept on the floor in his room while I struggled to stay on the cot he had provided for me in the ante room... struggled, that is, because several other women, especially his sister, tried to share it with me and camp cots are not made for sharing... it was easier to sleep on the floor mat, although that was also crowded. And, all through the night, the Sheikh sat cross-legged on his bed as he did in the day and he would pray. Outside the disciples sat all around the building praying, chanting a beautiful haunting sound.

I had come there to study how Islamic brotherhoods influenced politics although my excuse to the Sheikh was my desire to study the Koran. In the beginning I was afraid that I would never understand anything because I did not belong. And yet, one night - a long long night as all of them had been since I had come there - I began to wonder if I did not in fact belong. Gradually, I was becoming a familiar part of the group and my own identity and the world outside were slipping away.

When it was my turn to perform for him, my day, I knelt on the mat before him to recite the first chapters of the Koran, which I had memorized in Arabic. He sat looking at me, his disciples kneeling around him, all staring at me. Many were the written and oral exams I had passed in college and graduate school but this one I did not, I was totally overcome, stammered the first chapter, and then dried up completely.

And the Sheikh smiled, and said very gently he was most pleased that I was studying. He would be happy for me to continue and he would hear me again, when I was ready. As for me, my real purpose in being there was totally forgotten. I wanted then more than anything to succeed and accomplish what in his mind was the best thing I could ever do. To me then, as to the others around us, he was indeed a great man. I had long ago slipped into becoming one of his devoted disciples.

But of course I left and went back to Dakar and then home for my life and work was elsewhere. Looking back now from Seabury it seems to be all a dream and yet it was not.

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