1983

Ahmadiyya and urbanization: migrant women in Abidjan

AHMADIYYA AND URBANIZATION:
MIGRANT WOMEN IN ABIDJAN

By May Yacoob

W.P. No. 75

African Studies Center

1983

WORKING PAPERS
NO. 75
AFRICAN STUDIES CENTER

Boston University
270 Bay State Road
Boston, MA 02215

Ahmadiyya and Urbanization: Migrant Women in Abidjan

By May Yacoob

Most social science research on associations of urban women in developing countries has focused on elite women. It has been maintained that these associations are essential in helping women develop social networks and strategies useful in adapting to the stresses which accompany urban upheaval and the process of rural-urban migration.[1] Despite the relative lack of scholarly attention given to the adaptive and integrative mechanisms available to poor Muslim women fleeing rural areas, some studies have been undertaken, including the author's work on the Ahmadiyya movement. Specifically, this paper will examine how the stresses and pressures of urbanization have changed certain Islamic beliefs relating to the role of women. Although in an African context the Ahmadiyya movement has been primarily based in English-speaking countries, its separatist nature has been found appealing in other areas. Moslem migrants in Abidjan, for example, have accepted the Ahmadiyya because they have found it useful in solving problems which arose with migration.[2] It must be added that although the focus of this paper is on women, one cannot exclude the men of the community; many statements concerning women also apply to men.[3]

Before discussing my research findings, it is necessary to comment on some issues that arise for women researchers undertaking field work in a community bound by the values of Islam. I found it useful, for example, to assume the status of a married woman. First of all, it gave me a form of protection and placed me in the category of sister to other married women. Second, I was removed from a category of being a potential additional wife to their husbands. It was through those women "sisters" that I had access to the men in the community, who considered themselves my brothers.

When speaking to Moslem men outside this fictitious kin structure that was established through Ahmadiyya, I often had to adopt a special behavior. For example, a woman must be with another woman "relative" when talking to men. She could not look directly at the man speaking to her. One of the drawbacks in this kind of relationship is that the woman comes under the protection and social control that Moslem men would exert on a female relation. This writer found it advantageous to speak Arabic with men being interviewed because it is the language associated with the practice of Islam. Most women, on the other hand, spoke only Dioula, although they could read some Arabic. In fact, women went to the Ahmadiyya mosque because the Koranic readings and sermons were interpreted into Dioula.

Urban Immigrants

The formation of a cohesive association of migrants around the religious values of Ahmadiyya warrants a brief overview of the national socio-economic forces which contribute to the nature of urban problems in Abidjan, the capital. Abidjan is one of the most glamorous and modern cities of Africa, yet it has some of the most severe urban problems. This modern city with its luxurious hotels and skating rink seems to have the visible attributes of what economists have described as the "Ivorian Miracle," a "miracle" which is proven by political stability and a steady economic growth rate of 8 percent for the past 25 years. While this "miracle" comes from recognizing the importance of a diversified agriculture and the cultivation of a number of cash crops, the economic rewards which can be measured in quantitative terms affect only a small minority of the local population. In addition, this "miracle" causes very serious, albeit obscure, dislocation between Ivorians and expatriates.

This social dislocation stems from the fact that the nature of the economic development of the Ivory Coast is essentially due to the export of

agricultural products. For this reason, the country's economic growth became dependent on foreign capital, foreign markets, French administrative personnel, and on imported labor force emanating from Mali, Upper Volta, Guinea, Ghana and Nigeria. This labor force constitutes over 25 percent of the country's total population of approximately six million and earns 80 percent of rural wages.[4] In Abidjan, migrants account for over half the city's population. Although the capital cannot support the influx of migrants, the Ivorian government has continuously encouraged immigrants to come and stay because their very low wages have made the per capita income of Ivorians one of the highest in Africa, about $1000 per annum.

Even though immigrants are not considered to be citizens and they have no rights, privileges or governmental protection, they continue to flock into Abidjan which appears to offer escape from the hunger and dry lands of the Sahel.[5] As the immigrants continue to pour into the city, the country's resources available for Ivorians shrink. Thus, the presence of foreign Africans has provided the government with a scapegoat for much of the country's malaise. Ivorians tend to believe that the foreigners are the cause of unemployment, inflation, housing shortages, insufficient social services and the overcrowded educational facilities.[6]

Whatever the real cause of Abidjan's urban problems, data collected in the Ahmadiyya community showed that over 60 percent of the Ahmadi converts could not afford to live together with their families because they could not afford a large enough living space. Consequently, they often rent separate floor space for a mat or one room in a compound. The possibility for employment that Ahmadi converts found was in the "informal sector" of the economy.[7] The survey also showed that all members of the Ahmadi community had great difficulties in finding schools which would accept their children. Government health clinics would not treat them because as "non-residents,"

they did not qualify for identity cards. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that all of the initial converts into the Ahmadiyya movement were recruited from outside the employment office by the Pakistani Ahmadi Emir who came to Abidjan from Pakistan in search of teachers to begin the Ahmadi school.

Historically, voluntary ethnic associations have played a very important role in helping migrants of common ethnic origins adapt to urban life. They successfully met the social and emotional needs of migrants trying to adapt to urban life. While the Ivorian government incorporated these ethnic associations into its structure through membership in the PDCI, migrants have become very disenchanted with the country's political structure over the years and consequently have often refused to pay their party dues as a sign of protest.[8]

The government officially admits that migrant women face difficulties in adjusting to urban life due to the dearth of employment possibilities, housing, and day care facilities, and thus created the Ministry for the Affairs of Women (Condition Feminin) in an attempt to solve these problems. The Christian, well-to-do urban women of the country's administrative class who worked in this Ministry gave very little consideration to the problems faced by poorer, urban Moslem women.

The history of religious movements has shown that these movements function in times of stress to revive peoples' religious beliefs and activate their techniques for coping.[9] For rural Moslem migrant women, traditional Islamic coping techniques do not work. The body of assumptions which dictate which roles individuals should adopt do not work in the city as they did in rural areas. Ahmadi women born in villages and living in cities, for example, find it difficult to follow prescribed marriage patterns. These women express a sense of hurt and loss at not marrying their own men. Further, for migrants

of Islamic faith, the answers to urban problems cannot be provided through Christianity because they are already armed with a body of Islamic assumptions. An informant described how, on coming to Abidjan, he went to the Christian mission but could not accept the concept of God having a son, a father, and a mother; since life in the city is difficult anyway, he was not going to tempt the devil by saying that Allah has a mother.

The above discussion has shown that the problems of urbanization in Abidjan cannot be solved by the state, by ethnic associations, or through existing religious beliefs. Indeed, Moslem migrants in Abidjan accept Ahmadiyya beliefs only to the extent that they provide answers to some of these specific problems. In analyzing what the Ahmadiyya movement has been able to provide the Moslem urban migrant women, it is evident that this religious movement was adopted because it gave a religious justification for changes brought about through urbanization. Urban Moslems gravitated to a religious movement that marks a sharp break from established Islam in West Africa,[10] not because they are religiously famished or are unbelievers, but for the material and social benefits that neither the state nor established religions were able to provide.

Ahmadiyya and Islam

Briefly, the historical background and teachings of the Ahmadiyya shows that this movement, which was established on the Indian subcontinent at the beginning of this century, has been centered primarily in English-speaking Africa.[11] Politically, the movement has invariably allied itself with the ruling powers of the country so as to avoid confrontations with the government, be it colonial or national. Organizationally, it is similar to the Catholic missionary movement, with a centrally located mission in Rabwah, Pakistan. The Ahmadis were the first Moslems to translate the Koran into various languages, including Japanese, and the first to build a movement based

on the belief that the Islamic Jihad is not a war of the sword but a war against illiteracy and disease. To this end, their primary activities have been the establishment of schools and hospitals in addition to Ahmadi mosques. Theologically, the Ahmadiyya differentiates itself from established Islamic sects in that its members believe that women should be educated and allowed to pray in the mosques. This is a serious issue of contention between the Ahmadis and the greater Islamic world. Other Islamic sects believe in the seclusion of women and justify it by referring to the Koran. Ahmadis further believe that their founder, Ghulam Ahmad, was a prophet living after Mohammed; in the Moslem world this statement is considered heretical, as Mohammed is believed to be the last of the prophets.

Ahmadi Community

Demographic data show that the Ahmadiyya community in Abidjan had swelled from five members in 1962 to over 600 members in 1978, sixteen years later. The community consisted of migrants from ten different nations and twenty-five ethnic affiliations. Their length of residence in the Ivorian capital varied between five and fifteen years; the frequency of their visits to their home villages was once every two to five years. Women constituted 17 percent of the total community, 78 percent of whom could read and write and claimed to have a high school diploma. Outside of prostitution, however, the only forms of employment available to these women are selling prepared foods and trading contraband goods.

Data on Ahmadiyya showed that 32 percent of Ahmadi women were instrumental in introducing their husbands or male relatives to the movement. Some 25 percent of these women chose affiliation with Ahmadiyya even though they could attend other mosques.[12] Another 43 percent chose the movement because their husbands had introduced them to the teachings of Ahmadiyya. By joining their husbands and becoming members of the Ahmadiyya community, women

could participate in activities that the Emir and his wife planned at the mission compound. These activities for the women consisted of informal discussions on health, nutrition, readings from the Koran and explanations of Ahmadi Islam. As migrant women and strangers, these outings as a family were generally the only social activity women participated in outside of their homes.

Moslem women who converted to Ahmadiyya through marriage to Ahmadi men from their home villages did so because they expressed the fear that life in Abidjan was not safe for young married women from the village. They felt the need to stay close to their husbands. Also, as brides, they missed the kin support extended in their home villages. For these women, the Ahmadiyya community came to replace the village kin. It was observed that younger women in polygamous marriages converted to Ahmadiyya with their husbands while the older wives in the household did not. This provided the younger wife with a viable strategy as she secured for herself a special relationship with the husband and excluded the senior women.

Young women who had grown up in the city as the daughters of poor migrants could not be married to men from the village. Such men looked down on Abidjan women because they had neither money nor knowledge of their home villages. These young women created linkages with the Ahmadiyya movement, often claiming to be Ahmadi members. Within the context of their membership in the movement, they could marry men from outside their original ethnic group. In a certain sense, conversion to Ahmadiyya offers a solution to "ethnic marginality." A 22-year-old woman whose father was a Lebanese shop owner and whose mother a Senagalese, for example, was not accepted by either community. Her affiliation with the Ahmadiyya, however, provided kin substitutes and relative social freedom. This woman wanted to attend school to become a kindergarten teacher and was able to avoid conflict with her father by

expressing her wish to the Emira, wife of the Ahmadi Emir. She in turn spoke with the Emir, who persuaded the father that the education of Moslem daughters was necessary so as not to leave them dependent on their husbands.

As has been already noted, the Ahmadiyya provides a sense of community to migrant men and women in Abidjan. By belonging to this community migrants are making a decision to have access to a cohesive community that will substitute for their own home communities. Women are able to play a very important role in the crystalization of this community. Their visits to the mosque and discussions with other women allow for exploring and planning marriage possibilities. In fact daughters are brought to the mosque and are gradually socialized to elements of Ahmadiyya community life in the context of Islamic life. The women thus initiate the establishment of artifical kin to replace those left in the village.

The basic principle of recognizing women in Ahmadiyya resolves a very important conflict for urban Moslem women. While traditional Koranic teachings refer to women as "feeble-minded," in reality they are often significant contributors to the household earnings. In most migrant homes within the Ahmadiyya community, the survival of the family is possible only to the extent that women contribute to it. Their participation in the ritualistic ceremonies of the mosque legitimizes their role in the urban Islamic environment. Nevertheless, this ritualistic right within Ahmadiyya does not give the women the same rights as the male members. The distinction in their role is clearly expressed in the following paragraph from a sermon given by the Ahmadi missionary:

> Islam gave rights to the wife. Bad treatment of her is severely punished by Allah. It is a duty to give her the best treatment because you are charged with her protection. She herself has no power and you must not abuse this right. Islam gave rights to women recognizing them as equal because Allah says that woman is made of the same stuff of life that men are mode of. If you treat women badly, our life and society will not be healthy.

Adaptive Mechanisms for Daily Life

The basic conflict faced by migrants in defining their family structure, their economic unit, is resolved in their participation in Ahmadiyya. Traditional Islam, Islam as interpreted by the individual migrant, is understood to favor men who marry more than one wife - as long as each of the women is given "equitable" treatment. Ahmadis teach that the family unit has to be monogamous as in "modern days" (meaning urban life). It is humanly impossible to treat more than one woman equitably. Furthermore, 70 percent of the women in Ahmadiyya prefer monogamous marriages and thereby support Ahmadiyya teachings on this subject. For Ahmadiyya men, this teaching resolves the economic pressure of having to maintain a polygamous home. As one informant stated: "In the village we don't buy water, food or pay rent. What does it matter the number of wives one marries?"

The choice of clothing, which, for a Moslem woman, is the definition of her "religiousness," is often a conflicting situation for urban migrants. The to which a woman is supposed to cover up her body reflects the social and the pesonal definition of modesty, of purdah. In their home villages, these rules were easily followed as the diversity of roles required of an urban dweller did not exist in rural areas and, as such, did not pose a problem. Ahmadiyya women are asked to practice purdah "as they see fit." For example, women working with Europeans in the commercial section of the city dress in Western clothes, but the neckline of their clothing is usually high and their hems beneath the knees. In addition, they make sure that their manners do not "provoke" men. At home and in the mosque, women wear the traditional "boubou" dress and a light colored veil that covers their heads, nose and mouth. Market women wear a veil that covers the hair only. In giving the woman the choice to make her own decisions regarding purdah, Ahmadiyya makes it possible for women to adopt a life style comfortable for them.

The economically secure Ahmadi women married to government officials practice purdah by seclusion. They do not accompany their husbands to the mosques for prayers, yet they do come to visit the emir's wife and participate in non-formal education programs at the Ahmadiyya compound. Traditionally, many Moslem urban women do not leave their homes. Shopping, selling and other chores are carried out by young girls, eight to ten years old, who act as intermediaries between women and the outside world.

While traditional Islam does not favor the education of women, Ahmadis believe that in encouraging women to obtain an education they are training women "to exercise good judgment in decision making." Ahmadi women have access to educational facilities through the discussion groups that the Emir's wife conducts on nutrition, literacy and health.

The availability of educational resources is also important to non-Ahmadi women who have adopted children in need of education. Because the adopted children of migrant women cannot enter government schools, these women make significant contributions - often larger than the Ahmadis themselves - to the community and participate in its activities even though their primary motivation is access to the schools for their adopted children.

Ahmadiyya has been able to maintain very flexible and adaptive kinship structures. Many migrant groups come from the northern part of the country and from matrilinear societies. They are openly accepted by the members of the Ahmadiyya community who maintain Islamic patrilinear kinship structures. This flexibility has made the movement attractive to various ethnic groups.

Ahmadiyya attitudes toward mortuary customs are another example of how the movement makes separation from home easier. Migrant women often express intense guilt at not being able to return home at the time of a relative's death, yet affiliation with Ahmadiyya removes this guilt because these mortuary customs are considered to be non-Ahmadi. With this emotional

distancing, migrant women as well as men are drawn closer into the community.

The greatest desire of a Moslem is to go to Mecca. A barren woman can have sons there, the secrets of wealth become known to one there, and one's confirmation of being a real Moslem happens in Mecca. The expense in getting there, however, renders the trip unlikely for most migrants. Ahmadiyya helps solve this problem by teaching that one's true Islamic beliefs lie in the heart, not in Mecca. In this way, Ahmadis make religious obligations a very personalized issue rather than a moral issue.

The roles of the Emir and Emira are also very important to the migrant. They provide guidance, can be consulted on career possibilities, and in cases of illness can refer the migrant to the Ahmadi hospital in Ghana. Also, they can intervene in an existing marriage or arrange a marriage. In other words, they perform the role of family heads.

Both Ahmadi men and women feel a very profound and close obligation to other members of the Ahmadiyya community. Women help each other in starting businesses and in taking care of children. These responsibilities are readily accepted because, as an Ahmadi woman explained:

> If I turn somebody away, and if tomorrow I have trouble of some sort and go to tell my brothers and sisters (meaning the other members of the community) they will tell me to go where I came from and then even my husband will take this as an excuse to treat me badly.

In other words, this woman is saying that members of the Ahmadiyya community can replace the kin she left in the village.

In assessing Ahmadiyya, Ahmadi men and women expressed the idea that the community helps by giving them "a way for good behavior" while living in the city. One member summarized his belief by saying: "For me, Ahmadiyya is not a means for success, it is a preparation for success."

Ahmadi Identity

Four out of five Ahmadi men said that they would not admit their daughters to their house if they married a non-Moslem. "It is the rule of the religion" that daughters marry Moslems. Four out of five of these men also preferred that their daughters marry Ahmadis, explaining that Ahmadis are good men to marry, "especially in Abidjan," even if they have no money. These fathers explained that their daughters are in Ahmadi schools with boys and they grow up together like "brothers and sisters" (meaning first cousins). This is considered to be the best kind of marriage because if the man treats the woman badly he has the potential of angering the entire Ahmadi community. This implies that migrants affiliate themselves with the Ahmadiyya movement in part to form fictitious urban kin ties for marriage purposes and, further, they form a mutual aid association based on an Islamic code of ethics. Surprisingly, data has revealed that members would not mind if their daughters married non-Africans as long as the individual was Moslem and/or Ahmadi. Neither nationality nor race mattered. Over 65 percent of Ahmadi women had married outside the approved structure and as a result they were not accepted by either their own or their spouses' kin groups. Living in this culturally marginal social structure, their sense of identity has been undermined.

Ahmadiyya women use the mosque somewhat differently than other Moslems in West Africa. For traditional Moslems, the mosque is generally a place for prayer. Yet, for Ahmadi women it is a place where members meet and discuss Ahmadiyya life, where children learn, where the long Ramadan days are spent and where some members live. Also, every Friday night women go to the mosque

three hours early to talk about their work and their problems, and to inquire about "sisters" who are absent from prayer due to some family illness.

Having pride in one's identity is an important aspect in the process of successfully adapting to urban life. Until joining the Ahmadiyya, the only sense of identity that migrant women enjoyed was through their Islamic affiliation. Yet this affiliation did not provide women with a sense of identity resembling that of Ahmadiyya. The sense of pride that migrant Moslem women have in being permitted to pray in the mosque and to participate in the social activities held by the community, makes affiliation with Ahmadiyya much stronger than their mere Islamic affiliation.

For many women, the Emir's sermons in Dioula restored their sense of dignity and identity. These sermons and Ahmadiyya literature promote the Ahmadiyya philosophy of co-existence with other ethnic groups and religious sects. At the same time, Ahmadiyya Islam is shown to be very special. Its universality and sense of justice are recurring themes in conversations and sermons. The Ahmadiyya community in Abidjan is shown to be part of a greater Ahmadiyya world community. Thus, the morale of the Abidjan migrant is boosted by giving women pride in their identity as members of the world Ahmadiyya community. No longer are these women condemned to rural poverty and ignorance. Ahmadiyya restores a woman's sense of identity because upon becoming an "Ahmadi Moslem" she is no longer "just a Moslem." The sense of belonging to a specific community is expressed in the difference between Ahmadis and other Moslems. While the latter group can pray in the Ahmadi mosque, the former cannot pray in general mosques. Also, people in the Ahmadi community can only pray behind an Ahmadi leader. The symbolism in the form of prayer among the Ahmadis also differentiates them from the rest of the Islamic community. Ahmadis pray with their arms crossed while members of other Islamic sects pray with their arms straight.

Conclusion

Affiliation with Ahmadiyya reveals that the stresses of urbanization are demanding a change of values in Moslem men and women. These people consider Ahmadiyya as "natural" because it offers a religious justification for a mode of life that is different from traditional Islam. It is a life style that demands monogamy, social detachment from traditional obligations, and a life style that is socially, politically and economically focussed not only on the nuclear family but on the community as well. These changes are very difficult to justify and understand in traditional Islam, yet Ahmadiyya has succeeded in doing so, performing a psychologically integrative function under the stresses of urbanization. As urban couples, for example, Ahmadis have had to become more dependent upon each other in carrying familial out tasks and for emotional support. This sociological and economic dependence encourages a greater degree of equality than was traditionally observed. Conversion to Ahmadiyya seems to separate the couple from traditional obligations, freeing them (or forcing them) to take steps in that direction. While Islam remains the migrant's religion in essence, in a broad sense Ahmadiyya is the solution, temporary perhaps, to urban upheaval. Looking to the future of Moslem men and women in urban Africa, it seems only natural to expect that the emerging patterns of Islam will contain interwoven strands of Ahmadiyya teachings. As a reform movement, its liberalizing influence reconciles the teachings of Islam with modern urban needs.

In conclusion, Ahmadiyya exists and is accepted only to the extent that it is able to provide solutions. It provides access to resources otherwise difficult to obtain such as schools, hospitals, guidance and above all a community. It also provides a sense of identity and ethnicity. It has been accepted because the traditional concepts of Islam were not providing the answers to these needs. The potency of the process of urbanization is seen to

have greatly affected the role of women in terms of making it necessary for them to become main contributors to the household's survival. Ahmadiyya ritualistically recognizes this importance. Finally, by providing religious justifications and understanding in the chaotic experience of migration, Ahmadiyya has helped urban migrant women of the Moslem faith to develop new strategies to deal with urban problems.

Footnotes

[1]See the various articles in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., Woman, Culture, and Society (Stanford, 1975), especially Carol Hoffer, "Madam Yoko," and Nancy Leis, "Women in Groups: Ijaw Women's Associations." See also Filomina Steady, "Protestant Women's Associatons in Freetown, Sierra Leone," in Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay, eds., Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change (Stanford, 1976), and Kenneth Little, African Women in Towns (Cambridge, 1973).

[2]Data presented here is based on field work conducted in Abidjan between November, 1976 and April, 1978. This article represents a small part of my dissertation, "The Ahmadiyya: Urban Adaptation in the Ivory Coast" (Boston University, 1979).

[3]This article is based on a talk given at Kalamazoo College, Michigan, in August, 1979. I wish to thank Drs. Stillman and Leila Bradfield and Dr. Jean Hay for their useful criticism.

[4]For an in-depth study, see Samir Amin, Le Developpement du Capitalism en Cote d'Ivoire (Paris, 1967), and ILO, Adidjan, Urban Development and Employment in the Ivory Coast (Geneva, 1973).

[5]For further information on migrants' perception of the city, see Michel Bloch-Lemoine, Abidjan, Mythes et Realite (Abidjan, 1967).

[6]For an analysis of migrants in Abidjan, see Michael Cohen, Urban Policy and Political Conflict in Urban Africa (Chicago, 1974).

[7]For an analysis of the informal sector, see ILO, Abidjan.

[8]For more detailed analysis of the role of the PDCI in Abidjan, see Cohen, Urban Policy, and Claude Salem, "Pluralism in the Ivory Coast: The Persistence of Ethnic Identities in a One-Party State" (Ph.D. thesis, UCLA, 1975).

[9]A.I.C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," American Anthropologist, 58, 2 (1956), 264-281.

[10]For further discussion of this issue, see Humphrey Fisher, Ahmadiyya, A Study in Contemporary Islam on the West African Coast (Oxford, 1963). For further discussion of the role that Ahmadiyya and other movements played in the urbanization of Lagos, see Pauline Baker, Urbanization and Political Change: The Politics of Lagos, 1917-1967 (Berkeley, 1974).

[11]For an excellent account of the rise of Ahmadiyya in India, see Spencer Lavan, The Ahmadiyya Movement: A History and Perspective (1974).

[12]Moslem women over the age of fifty can enter any mosque because of having reached menopause. Since their capability to reproduce has ended, they are considered to be "safe" and not threatening - or distracting - to men.