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Salma Ahmed Nageeb. *New Spaces and Old Frontiers: Women, Social Space, and Islamization in Sudan*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004. vii + 217 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0596-2.

Reviewed by Stephanie F. Beswick (Department of History, Ball State University)  
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## How to Make Sudanese Islamic Fundamentalism Work for You

*New Spaces and Old Frontiers* is an unexpected and fresh account of Sudanese Muslim women's agency in the African country of Sudan. In four entertaining and fascinating case studies conducted in the country's capital, Khartoum, and nearby Omdurman, sociologist, Salma Ahmed Nageeb of Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman, has studied the everyday lives of females from different social and ethnic backgrounds. Her quest has been to comprehend and document how her relatively young Muslim female case subjects have negotiated freedom and space in their homes as their country has increasingly embraced fundamental Islam, politically and socially.

Nageeb argues that although private spaces are associated with women and are often viewed as domestic and minimally political, and conversely public spaces are often associated with men and thus, perceived to be politically and economically important, her study demonstrates a different set of variables. More specifically, the author departs from the popular scholarly belief that females are those most affected by Islamization; on the contrary, the author demonstrates women's manipulation of fundamental Islam in Sudan. Nageeb argues that women's construction of their own social spaces reveals their sense of self and cultural awareness of the inter-related sociocultural and political forces of Islamization, globalization, and "tradition" at the local or translocal level (p. 1).

According to Nageeb, Islam has long been part of

the cultural, social and political fabric of Sudanese society, although the author does fail to note that the southern third of the country comprises people who are not Muslim but rather follow Christianity and/or their own African religions. In referring to her government's recent adoption of Islamic fundamentalist policies, however, Nageeb notes that after Sudan's Islamist coup in June 1989, the "Islamization Project" was adopted to represent the new state ideology. Islamism now came to form the basis for state policies, legislation, practices and laws and the state's political discourse (p. 16). Further, the preoccupation of the Islamists with gender, gender interaction, and women's social and public conduct became central to their "civilization" project (p. 21). Islamization, thus, introduced new cultural forces shaping sociocultural change. The author further suggests that Islamization can be seen as a process aimed at building the Islamic *umma*, or nation. It is also a process of defining new loyalties that are (re-)shaping the position of Sudan on the world map.

The book comprises three parts. Part 1 outlines the sociopolitical background against which the study is located. It focuses on analyzing Islamization as a process of homogenization of society and culture under "the" Islamic way of life which, in turn, leads to changes in the social structure (p. 5). Part 2 concerns the case studies of four women and represents the most important part of the book. Part 3 is devoted to the analysis of women's spaces at the societal level. It specifically focuses on the market, Qur'anic groups, and women's private spaces.

The author demonstrates in this context that women, despite intensified state and social control, are able to appropriate the market as “women’s space” through their social interactions. Perhaps, more importantly in light of Sudan’s Islamic fundamentalist policies, mosque space had come to form an umbrella for women’s social networking and political organizations. It has also become a legitimate pretext for women to practice physical and social mobility.

The most fascinating part of the book is the case studies –or life histories –of Part 2. Here is the meat of the book and it is entertaining. Nageeb has noted numerous conversations with these women which are very revealing.

In the first case study, we meet a young unmarried woman, Amel, and by way of the author, we follow the ways through which the cultural forces of Islamism penetrate her everyday life. The most outstanding event that becomes clear to the author is that the “neo-harem” in Amel’s everyday life –wherein women’s place in the home is doubly protected by the fundamentalist policies of the present government and against an even more oppressive cultural tradition among the urban northern Sudanese–has given rise to relations with a new social elite. This young woman is thus able to maneuver and carve out a new form of liberty in her everyday life.

The second case study is of a married woman, Dalia, whose ascribed space is the marital house. The author demonstrates how, through this middle-class woman, females can control their environment through adherence to class structures; it shows another manifestation of the “neo-harem” in women’s everyday life. In this case, the “neo-harem” is emerging as a result of the attempts of the male authority within the household to place the dictates of an older “tradition” as a competitive force in the face of the Islamization process. Thus, the sociocultural forces of religion can be employed by women as bargaining power against restrictive spouses and family members.

The third case study is of a divorcee, Nana, whose ascribed space is in the process of undergoing tremendous change, having recently shifted from her former marital residence back to her natal family house. Demoted societally as a divorcee, she now plots relentlessly to find another husband, and freedom. Nana plays numerous suiters off against each other. In this case, according to the author, Nana’s careful gambling to assert her perception and claim to a new, higher, social space is more easily revealed than in other cases.

The last case study is that of Hiba, a young Nubian woman who is ideologically engaged in religiously purifying her own space against that of her family who are not, according to this last case subject, religious enough. Hiba has obtained a degree in Islamic studies and the author suggests that the religious orientation in this case is stronger than a mere reflection of the sociocultural force of Islamism. Hiba’s religiosity becomes an authority and a social power which ultimately informs the creation of “a different world.” In this case the ascribed space—the family house—is a field where the accumulated social power of the “knower,” in this case Hiba, is exercised in terms of Islam to shape the physical organization and the rules of her social interaction within her family’s home space. Thus, Hiba is able to dislodge her family’s former social control over her life. She is also in a position to negate state authorities and does so on every possible occasion; that is, the state authorities are not Islamic enough for her either. She is thus able to impose her vision on the division of the social world, discard gender, class and ethnic inequalities, free herself from social and parental control, and construct the social space that she chooses.

Another powerful theme which stands out in this book is the obsession with race and visual appearance which is intimately connected with class relations in central urban Sudan. Looking like an African is bad; looking lighter is good, and the visual markers of skin color and hair texture define who is an “Arab” (good) and who is not (bad). Those who look more African are considered to be of a lower rank. Those from the far west of Sudan are not vested with the prominent title of “Arab,” rather they are merely referred to as “Westerners” (in itself a derogatory term). In the case of one young woman, whose father was a Westerner (a Rizeiqat) she stated: “Alhamdulillah, my hair is okay and I have got all the right features from my mother, but I am dark, thanks be to my father [sarcastically]. Who would want to marry one with such a color? Every man wants safra. I myself use all these creams to find a man with a light skin color. If I stayed dark do you think a light man would want his children to be ‘dirtied’...?” According to the practice of skin bleaching, it is important to bleach out the African blackness of the skin so as to be viewed as an “Arab” Sudanese. In the meantime, the sellers of the skin-bleaching creams impress upon their female clients that “what is important is that your face should not look dark. You know I feel pity for women whose faces are dark. Excuse me, but what is the difference between their faces and shoes?” (p. 76)

On the other hand, the author argues that Islamization has liberated some women racially, citing, for example, the Nubian woman, Hiba. The latter ceased to care about her long-term sense of social inequality because of her very black skin because “the use of any means to change the way Allah created the human being is forbidden in Islam” (p. 149). Thus, Islamization has actually allowed some to escape the obsession of being black and not rich enough to afford skin creams to become more physically attractive and recognized as “Arab.” Adopting a fundamental form of Islam has therefore allowed certain women to escape social, racial, and gender inequality.

Some of the subjects’ attitudes towards the male members of their families cited by the author are very amusing, and telling: “it is a mercy from Allah that my mother and I have this place and my brothers and father are not to live with us here; they would have made it hell for us by putting their nose in everything” (p. 58); and “Since this wall exists, he will never feel all right unless I am behind it. I do not know why civilization never came his way” (p. 59); or “Smoking came by the by, yes, but still marriage is important. I tried all of them: unmarried, married, and divorced. Marriage is the best. Aside from the disgust of men, which is normal, it makes your life different” (p. 120).

What stands out about the interview subjects in this book is their lively obliviousness to events beyond their own households, not the least of which is their country’s horrendous civil war in the south, where the non-Muslim populace reacted violently to the pressures of formal Islamization in 1983, and in which millions have

died. Rather, these women appear to be intensely preoccupied with such occupations as remaining out of the sun and regularly applying expensive skin-bleaching creams. One interview subject, for example, stated: “I have no objection as long as a charming girl like you is going to visit me. But don’t give me a headache with what you read in your books and don’t ask me to write or read anything” (p. 108).

What is also clear in this book is that embracing fundamental Islam for personal female power has only been undertaken by the younger members of Sudan’s urban Muslim society. Many middle-aged Muslim Sudanese women, however, expressed the thought that with regard to gender, Islamist policies and practices are “making us without traditions” (p. 20). Thus, the new Islamic fundamentalism has brought about a loss of control of the old over the young. Senior women were a social authority to which younger women deferred. Today this has changed.

Ultimately, this book makes it clear that Islamic fundamentalism possesses elements which can be liberating. Some Sudanese women have prevailed by invoking Allah’s name regularly against controlling parents and even spouses in a bid to renegotiate certain personal rights that, prior to the Islamic revolution, would have been difficult if not impossible to secure. Nageeb demonstrates that these Muslim women appear to have far more control of their lives than many scholarly studies have previously suggested. Though not without its flaws—the author rarely defines her terms, though her meaning usually comes clear after reading on for awhile—this book comes highly recommended for all scholars of the women in Africa and the Islamic world.

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