Gambian griottes, or female bards, are in a serious predicament. Islamic ethics prescribe that women should behave in a modest way, while conversely the griottes’ very profession is a threat to their modesty by their behaviour and the way they dress. How do these women reconcile their identity as female performers with Islamic values? The Gambia is an interesting setting in which to explore this question because of its long history with Islam. There was even talk that President Jammeh wanted to impose the shari’a in this small West African country.

For centuries the griottes’ male counterparts, the griot, have attracted the attention of scholars. If griottes are mentioned in literature, however, they mostly appear only in footnotes, or are mentioned in passing. Indeed, in actual fact they are very conspicuous in the Gambia. They can be recognized by their flamboyant style of dressing, and with their sharp voices they are audible from a great distance. This being the case, the following aims to provide insight into the griottes’ practices. The main activity of griottes is performing daaniroo, a Mandinka word that is difficult to translate. When griottes set out for daaniroo, they sing or recite their patrons’ praises. Praises, which are composed of a mixture of fixed formulae and genealogies, are powerful since they affect and persuade the patron by referring to the great deeds of his or her ancestors. In return for their praises, the griottes are rewarded with money or goods. So, daaniroo can be interpreted both as praising and as gift exchange.

Daaniroo not only refers to the gift exchange between griottes and their patrons, but also to the gift exchange between believers and God. People beseech God by offering gifts to a mediator, in the hope that God will reward them with divine blessings. In the relationship between griottes and patrons, daaniroo has the connotation of praying and is a way of praising God. An equivalence exists between its performance in the sense of praying and its performance in the sense of praising in both cases it concerns an invocation that is responded to by a reward: a gift from the patron or grace from God. There are also differences, in particular because of the ambivalent relationship between music and belief in Islamic tradition (cf. Chary 2000).

There is an inherent tension between the exaltation of man and the adoration of God. Qur’anic scholars, who have an influential position in the area where my field research was conducted, therefore considered the Islamic identity of griottes dubious. They believed that these women could not sing and still be good Muslims. In their opinion singing distracts the worshippers’ attention from God and leads to the loss of one’s self-control.

A distinction can be drawn between two occasions on which griottes practice daaniroo. On the first type of occasion they are invited by their patrons to perform. This includes naming ceremonies, marriages, and initiations. On the second type of occasion griottes themselves take the initiative to perform, including at the market. In the area around Basse Santa Su, the provincial capital of eastern Gambia, griottes are difficult to ignore. The market is a convenient place because griottes are free to go there whenever they want, whereas ceremonies are not organized on a daily basis. At the market they easily meet people and earn a little, as people usually have money in their pockets when they go to Basse Santa Su. Daaniroo at the market is probably a recent phenomenon. Several middle-aged griottes considered it the outcome of the historical process in which colonialism induced changes that eroded the old system of patronage. In order to survive, they had to perform daaniroo at the market. The development of daaniroo at the market may also be related to rising economic pressure on women. The griottes with whom I worked complained that they have many ‘family problems’ nowadays, and indeed, they have become a great extent responsible for feeding their households. Taking into account that most of them do not farm and that regular employment is restricted to men, these women have developed strategies to embed their performances between household chores and food. The market is the natural place to practise daaniroo because food crops are sold there.

The performance at the market is considered not an ‘authentic’ form of daaniroo, and several patrons condemn it, preferring the daaniroo performed at their ceremonies and upon their invitation. The local Islamic scholars disapprove of daaniroo at the market for other reasons. In their perception earning a living by means of music is immoral. They argue that griottes should not expose themselves as public women. Islamic law commends unremitting labour, but in the judgement of the Muslim clerics, daaniroo practised at the market cannot be regarded as work. The leader of The Gambia Muslim Women’s Association compared it to exploitation: ‘Griottes beg from us even though they are sometimes richer than we are. Nevertheless, we have to give them our last cent, and sometimes our family is still hungry. What griottes do is very bad and therefore they will have marks in their faces by which they can be recognized on Judgement Day. The Prophet has said that we should scatter sand in their faces.’

Moreover, the griottes’ increasing contribution to household maintenance collides with the Muslim ideal of the man as the principal provider.

The negative assessment of the griottes’ public performances as conflicting with Islamic morals may have been increased under the influence of ‘bumpsters’ (follow tourists). As a result of the enormous growth of the tourist industry in the Gambian coast, numerous boys turned ‘bumpsters’ into a profession. These ‘bumpsters’ regard tourists as patrons who can provide money, luxury goods, and mobility. Some equate the obtrusive way ‘bumpsters’ ask for gifts with the activities of griottes. They note that ‘bumpsters’ as well as daaniroo as it is practised today is haram. The griottes themselves see this growing tourism as their chance to being a Muslim and being a bard. They try to behave as correct Muslims by living according to the pillars of Islam and, in turn, to avoid the scepticism of the Qur’anic scholars by accentuating the Islamic dimension of their profession.

Islamizing griottes

A striking development is that the griottes change their daaniroo as a form of praying. The way they request their patrons for gifts may, to a certain extent, be equated with the way mendicants beg for alms. Griottes, for example, punctuate the praises sung or recited for their patrons at the market with blessings. These blessings tend to be fairly formulaic utterances, of the sort ‘May God bless you with long life’. Furthermore, they lace their praises with Qur’anic verses and religious phrases. When setting out for the market, griottes often wear a special kind of headdress that is usually worn by people who have made the hajj. It seems that by wearing this headdress they want to emphasize their devotion. They also explain their choice of dress in an Islamic context stressing that they dress splendidly to demonstrate that they have ‘a clean heart’ (i.e. that their appearance corresponds to their moral values). Griottes also interpret their way of practising daaniroo in a moral context. Before they set out for the market, they form groups because as pious Muslims, they believe, they are not allowed to perform individually. A woman venturing on to the street alone is regarded as ‘prey to Satan’. By practicing on her own, a griotte runs the risk of being depicted as a ‘wanton woman’. When she mingles with her colleagues, social control is being exercised. It seems that griottes single out specific elements of their traditional cultural background and integrate and reinterpret them in the light of Muslim norms, in order to meet the expectations of the local reformist scholars. The roles of griottes may have expanded to incorporate various aspects of an Islamic culture, as the Gambian president, Yahya Jammeh, lately began to demand greater adherence to the rules of the religion.

In their movements women are restricted by the boundaries of the dominant Muslim gender ideology, but griottes have to cross these boundaries to be able to exercise their profession. In their position as bards, they have acquired a certain freedom that other women in Gambian society are not allowed to exercise. On the one hand, this explains their strong position, but on the other hand, it makes them vulnerable to criticism. To disentangle themselves from this ambiguous position in which they operate, griottes have developed strategies to embed their performances in a reformist Islamic discourse. By employing such strategies, they are attempting to earn a living without subverting their position as respectable Muslim women.

Note

1 The Mandinka comprise the majority of the Gambian population.

References


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