

Bala Saho, *Contours of Change: Muslim Courts, Women, and Islamic Society in Colonial Bathurst, the Gambia, 1905–1965*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2018, 187 pp, index. Paperback \$29.95.

Contours of Change is a monograph that aims to elucidate the “place of women in the formation of colonial Bathurst, the evolution of women’s understanding of the importance of law in securing their rights, as well as the ways in which women utilized the new qadi court system to fight for growing rights within the domestic sphere” (xii). The book explores unpublished records of the Muslim court at Banjul and from the Gambian National Archives. The main argument holds that colonization and its restructuring of the court system created the qadi courts which unintentionally had a positive effect on women’s rights within the legal system especially in areas of family law. The majority of the documentary evidence comes from suits involving women as complainants or respondents and mostly surrounding family law issues such as marriage and divorce.

This book helps readers understand “the history of the native courts” and “the contexts in which they were created in their respective regions” (16). The first three chapters are devoted to that history and chronicle how the colonial courts replaced the traditional more communal way in which cases were tried in Bathurst and Gambia. Sometimes Gambian tradition was in harmony with Islamic law and hard to tell whether some legal traditions came from Gambian society or adherence to Islamic law. Saho shows how the Muslim and traditional contexts of this region helped shape the form of the new qadi courts in Gambia and where in the colonial judicial hierarchy the native and qadi courts sat. Saho argues that through this process of setting up the native court system Gambians formed allegiance to the colonial state, especially through installing and paying its staff and tribunal members; dealing with colonial oversight of the courts; collecting fines and fees, and using the courts to register grievances and debts. The process also involved meshing Gambian traditions, Islamic legal ideals with colonially imposed laws. In incorporating colonially regulated marriage into the legal structure, native courts became places where women could challenge Gambian patriarchy, especially in marriage law.

Despite the “blurring” of the lines between Islamic law and regional cultural tradition, Saho attempts to explain how the colonial native courts in the end made judgements that were different from the indigenous traditions that were based on a regional understanding of the *sharia*. As Saho points out “unfortunately, the court records do not provide information on how some of these marriages were arranged and coordinated” and must certainly have been missing other basic information, still, Saho’s explication often lead this reader to more questions than answers.

The very first example Saho gives from women litigants' suits before the qadi courts is illustrative of the missing information, assumptions about the readers' knowledge of Islamic law, and mismatched analysis in nearly all of the court evidence presented in this work. Saho introduces the case of a widowed woman complainant with a quote and a summary: "her husband's cousin, wanted to marry her so he could inherit all of [her] husband's properties'... The qadi asked [her] to take possession of her husband's properties ... and told [her cousin] not to touch any of the deceased's properties, as he [the cousin] could never inherit the deceased properties" (28). Saho provides an endnote explaining that the Mandinka and Wolof in Gambia practice widow inheritance by "brothers." A page later in Saho's analysis he explicates that "the qadi relied on Islamic law, which gave rights to the woman (the litigant) to keep the properties left by the *first* [my emphasis] husband. This represented a significant rejection of tradition, clothed in the language of tradition" "custom dictated, the *second* [my emphasis] husband ... would have maintained control over both the woman and the property" (29). Although, nowhere in the quote from National Archives (NRS) record or Saho's summary of the case, does the reader get to know if the records explicitly say she was married to the cousin against her will and if the case was a matter of divorce. Did Saho assume she was married against her will or in her absence? Saho clearly analyses this ruling as a privileging of Islamic law over traditional forms of marriage and inheritance. While it is true that male cousins usually are not mentioned as beneficiaries according to Islamic inheritance rules, neither does the law privilege widows as sole beneficiaries.

Another issue is the author's commentary which at times undermines the message of women claiming their rights: this issue also first appears at the very beginning of the book. In the introduction, Saho characterizes some of women's problems within marriage as "matters of beautification" (xv), specifically women's complaints about not receiving jewelry from their husbands. The NRS records show that jewelry was an important source of money for women in times of crisis; one woman used her jewelry to repay bride wealth in order to facilitate divorce from a man she accused of abuse, including penetrating her with a stick (100–101).

However, despite the above mentioned issues, *Contours of Change* does introduce scholars to the potential of Gambian qadi court records for enhancing our understanding of the way in which colonial courts were formed, the disruptions to African traditional law and African practice of Islamic law those courts produced, and how those disruptions allowed women new arenas and tools in their household and societal struggles. The narrative that flows from the court documents is also of great value. In these proceedings, women appear before the court and provide many details of household life that were