

'Life in a Girls' Hostel'—Part X

House Mother Hits Sudanese and Their Islamic Society Customs as 'Abnormal'

By Bayyinah Sharrieff

At the breakfast conversation with Miss Bryant (the white woman's warden at the University of Khartoum, Sudan) with the two female Coptic (Christian) students, Miss Bryant said that she wanted to get to know the girls in the hostel better.

SHE expressed the desire to have three girls every Wednesday visit her home and breakfast with her. The two Coptic girls and I were the first group she invited.

She told me these two girls were of very good character. Since she wanted me to be in good company, she recommended I accept these girls as friends. She said she found them trustworthy and dependable.

She then commented on the Sudanese girls having uncivil and odd ways. She and the Coptic girl said things to the effect that the Muslim girls were not really as pure and as clean as they appeared to be.

THEY told me that it was not normal for females to be separated from males and that since this separation of males from females existed in the Sudan, the Sudanese were not keeping in the bounds of normal behavior. She said if I watched them closely, I would notice their abnormal behavior.

Coming from a Western society (American) where I was brought up to believe that if men did not mix with women and vice-versa, they

were not normal, and going into an Islamic society where one does not find men mixing with women except members of their families — I thought, in agreement with Miss Bryant, that these people must be abnormal.

On university campuses here in America when the weather is sunny and pleasant (as it is most of the time in the Sudan) one will find male and female students lying on the lawns together in the sun, displaying open gestures of affection.

BUT IN the Sudan, it is not even acceptable for one to look into the eye of a member of the opposite sex, unless they were partners in marriage or members of the same family. This is considered a trait of an evil seeking person.

Although at that time I did not know it, it is written in the Holy Qur-an that "the Believing women" should "lower their gaze" (24:31) when in the company of men not of their families. I had to comply to this general code of ethics, if I wanted to live in peace among the Sudanese.

I was told by one of my Muslim Sudanese colleagues that if I wanted to be accepted and respected in

their society, I must not look into the faces of the male students at the university. I was instructed that when walking on the campus, to cast down my eyes, when passing male students. If and when I had purpose to converse with a male student, that I must look past him and not in his eyes.

NOT BEING in the knowledge of myself, God, Whose proper name is Allah, and my true religion Islam, I could not appreciate the value of conforming to such a rule, and agreed with Miss Bryant to the uncivil and illogical order of that Islamic society.

Miss Bryant spoke of the high civilization in which I had been born and raised (America) and pointed to the industrially underdeveloped Sudan as proof of the Sudanese being of an unprogressive civilization. She had me look at the materialistic poorness of the majority of the Sudanese as proof of the people being uncivilized—which is definitely not true.

She tried to have me believe that since she and I were both from Western civilizations (she refrained from using the word Christian, due to a previous disagreement we had on that subject) that

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we had more in common than had the Sudanese girls and me.

I LEFT the breakfast table feeling a little uncertain about my Sudanese Muslim friends. With what had

just been told to me by Miss Bryant and the other two Christian girls, I watched my Sudanese sisters with a very critical eye, looking for fault in their seemingly pure and good characters.

To be continued