WOMEN & GENDER

Heidi Nast. *Concubines and Power: Five Hundred Years in a Northern Nigerian Palace*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 288 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $68.95. Cloth. $22.95. Paper.

We have Orientalism to thank for exoticising the term "palace" with its attendant concepts of "harem" and "concubines." But this is not a study of intrigue and illicit liaisons. Heidi Nast's *Concubines and Power: Five Hundred Years in a Northern Nigerian Palace* demystifies the exotic, offering an analytical view of concubines' roles in the communal context of the royal palace in Kano, Nigeria. The "power" of the title is not their own, but the power of patriarchy, which Kano concubines supported by orchestrating grain and indigo operations for the benefit of the state, and by providing reproductive services that underpinned patriarchal rule. The slave status of these concubines consigned the benefit of their productivity and reproduction to the political power they served.

Nast's aim is to explain the roles of concubines in controlling grain prices and indigo production. She also discusses the effects of Fulani reform and colonialism on their roles. Nast pulls together an impressive amount of material drawn from established historical views of Hausa-Fulani history and studies of royal communities elsewhere in Africa, but the most innovative aspect of this work is its reliance on aerial photos and maps in reconstructing a spatial geographic history of the palace community. In addition, commentary from individuals in the community itself offers new perspectives that outpace earlier academic views.

The most intriguing aspect of this investigation is the question it raises for readers: why could concubines not use their roles to assert and protect their own power? As Nast establishes, the patriarchal social order fixed concubines' roles to benefit its agenda, regardless of whether it had yet become Islamic. Indeed, the pre-Islamic system of concubinage persisted as an anomaly in Islamic royal settings. Islam mandates that a slaveholder actively work toward freeing his slaves by educating them; upon their conversion to Islam, they are to be freed. Yet concubinage systems in renowned royal settings like the Ottoman Empire's Topkapi seraglio flourished. Similarly, in Kano, concubines were neither freed nor allowed to gain power. Nast's study indicates clearly why this was so. Although a concubine in Kano may have had the authority to set grain prices, she was nevertheless a subject of the king, without power of her own. Because the work and reproductive capabilities of concubines were central to the vitality of the state, the institution of concubinage was important as an effective means of controlling them. Disenfranchised by virtue of their slave status and removed from beneficial kin networks, concubines used the system in the only way they could, by working within their immediate environment for the betterment of a larger social order in which they could thrive vicariously, through

the success of a son who might ascend to the role of emir. Precisely because royal concubines were the state's main source of both reproductive and agrarian currency, their power had to be checked by patriarchal controls.

It would be interesting to compare the extent to which Hausa patriarchy circumscribed women's power prior to mass Islamization in the nineteenth century. Popular scholarship echoes the sentiment that reformist jihadists attenuated women's roles, but as Nast's study demonstrates, pre-jihad concubines' "power" rendered few benefits to them beyond sustenance and nominal security. As the role of the concubine has diminished in recent centuries, it has to be considered that perhaps it is the exploitation of concubines that has diminished. The extent to which Islam effected such change remains to be studied.

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