

By September 2007 Science Editor

[Why Does Sharia, the Law of Horror, Catch On amongst Africans?](#)

The Nigerian case

Amina Lawal was saved in 2002 from stoning to death. And after that, lawyers used the notion of "extended pregnancy," arguing that under Sharia law, a five year interval is possible between human conception and birth. Her guilt: having sex out of the wedlock. She gave birth to a child while being divorced. Amina was denounced by her ex father in law, in the northern Nigerian state of Katsina. She defended herself in front of the court by saying she had had sexual contact with Yahaya Mohammed, who had promised to marry her if she consented for sex. The man recognized they had had a relationship, but denied having had sex with Amina. As sharia requires four witnesses to the sexual act, Yahaya Mohammed was released, but in the case of Amina the baby was an irrefutable proof. In 2001, Safyia Husaini also escaped in the last moment being stoned in October 2001 for having had sex out of the wedlock and was saved especially due to international protests. In 2002, in central Nigeria, Fatima Usman, 32 and Ahmed Ibrahim, 35, were condemned to death because they had sex before being married. Baryia Ibrahim was condemned to 80 whips for getting pregnant while being 15 years old and unmarried. After giving birth, nobody wanted to marry her. In May 2002, Mallam Ado Baranda was condemned to stoning for having raped a 9-year-old girl. The man said later that his declaration was pulled out under torture. Rape is an endemic social problem in many African countries, where there is an increasing violence towards women and children. The hand amputations are another issue. For stealing a cow or a bike, many Nigerians under the sharia law are mutilated now. In Nigeria, many people are prisoners of the lack of secular school, and the fight for power between the Muslim North and Christian South. Not so long ago, the African Islam was regarded as less orthodox than the Arab countries, due to the influence of the local animistic religions. When many Africans converted to Islam in the 17-20th centuries, the traditional religions resisted long against the imported religion, hence the sincretism and the survival of numerous pre-Islamic rites and beliefs. But the massive expansion of the Islam in the south of Sahara in the 20th century seems to be accompanied by harshness in the application of the Islamic laws, something unconceivable some generations ago. The Islamic religion favors a type of social cohesion, with an interest centered on the group, not the individual. The traditional African societies were already organized around this basic principle. On the other side, Islam appears to be the natural religion of the poor and oppressed. Not only in Africa, but also in the Middle East and South Asia, Islam imposes its law in the poor quarters: no alcohol, sexual abstinence, fasting and regular prayers several times a day. A strong group identity is favored by the use of distinctive clothing and common observation of the rites. The study of the Koran offers the possibility for the faithful lacking financial means to receive an education in the Arab language. In the Third World, governments do not have enough funds for offering free education for all children and millions of them had no other option than the Koranic school for getting a minimal formal education. But in many of these remote schools children do not learn maths or sciences and sometimes they are not even taught how to read and write. They only have the privilege of memorizing the Koran's texts. But these schools offer free meals for poor children and sometimes even a place for sleeping. The imams (the religious authority) are the guarantors of the Islamic law and their power is both religious and political. But why is there such a harsh punishment for an adulterous (i. e. having sex out of the wedlock) woman? This woman is considered a menace for the established order, a subversive element, which can trigger a social chaos in a society where the family is the base for everything: broken marriages, children growing alone and financial ruin. They socially destroy a man. She's difficult to control and a bad example for the other women, the social anarchy and the denial of the ethic code... Since 1999, sharia has been applied in 12 states of the northern Nigeria, out of the total of 36, but it already existed for centuries. During the British times, it coexisted hard with the secular law code. It was applied mostly inside the family or at a local level. Today, this is a menace to the constitutional integrity of the nation. Some cities are divided in areas where sharia is applied, and others where it is not. 15 years of military regimen left an inheritance based on violence in the Nigerian society. The numerous public executions, ordered by the army and the lynching of the thieves and other criminals, organized by the militias, the people got accustomed to repeated violations of the human rights. The Biafra

war from 1970 was bloody and caused millions of victims, harming the Nigerian social web. The police and the juridical system are still regarded as ineffective and corrupt, and faced with the increasing criminality, the state is unable to ensure security for its citizens. For an increasing number of Nigerians, most severely affected by the economic crisis, sharia means the answer to all the bad things. And while the Muslim identity strengthens, a cultural, religious and territorial split is created between the Muslim North and Christian South. In a society based on the lack of civil and secular rights, the mob is the victim of all kinds of manipulations and religion is an important tool for power. In 2001, the northern states did not air the Miss World Show, that took place in Abuja, Nigeria. They considered it a moral offence. Sharia Law also puts Nigeria in a difficult situation, as the country launched itself in a program of foreign and international investments, NEPAD, aiming at economic development and attracting capital into African countries.