

Exploring Islamic Family Culture as a Heritage of African Family Settings: Implications for Christian Mission Advancement

Muyiwa Adepitan Oyinloye

Abstract

This paper examines the intricate fabric of Islamic family culture within the broader context of African family traditions. Islamic family culture centers on the life and experiences of the Islamic family from birth to death. It includes their way of life, what they own, and how they celebrate. Advancing Christian missions in a rapidly growing Islamic faith requires intentional strategies. Using ethnographic research and historical analysis, this study examines family dynamics, values, rites, and traditions within Islamic households across various African communities. Through a comparative approach, we identify similarities and differences between family structures, highlighting areas of commonality and divergence that can inform mission efforts. Central to our inquiry is the proposition that understanding and appreciating the Islamic family heritage can help missionaries to be better informed about nuanced and practical Christian mission approaches. By acknowledging the rich tapestry of Islamic family heritage, Christian missionaries can cultivate deeper relationships and dialogue with local communities, fostering mutual respect and understanding. This approach not only enhances the efficacy of Christian missions but also contributes to interfaith harmony and social cohesion. We argue for a reimagining of Christian mission strategies that are grounded in cultural sensitivity, humility, and a willingness to engage with diverse religious traditions. Rather than seeking conversion alone, Christian missions can embrace a holistic approach that respects and builds upon existing cultural and religious heritage. Through this lens, the Islamic family culture emerges not as a barrier but as a bridge for advancing Christian mission objectives within the African context.

Keywords: Islamic family culture, African heritage, Christian missions, interfaith dialogue, cultural sensitivity.

Muyiwa Adepitan Oyinloye, Department of Religious Studies, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State

Introduction

Africa is home to a diverse tapestry of cultures, religions, and traditions, with Islam and Christianity being two of the continent's most prominent faiths. The Islamic family culture in Africa is deeply rooted in values, practices, and traditions that shape the dynamics of family life and community relationships. As Christian missions seek to advance their outreach and impact in Africa, it is essential to explore the implications of engaging with Islamic family culture as a heritage of African family settings.

This paper aims to examine the nuances of Islamic family culture in Africa, highlight its significance within the broader context of African heritage, and discuss how understanding and respecting Islamic family values can inform and enhance Christian mission strategies on the continent.

Nigeria, with a total population of over 200 million people, comprises more than 250 ethnic groups and is home to three major religions. The different religions portray the kind of family structure exhibited, although Nigerian families have undergone tremendous changes over the years. These changes have resulted from societal values, norms, the economy, and orientations. Over the last few decades in Nigerian societies, families have experienced a drastic fall in marriage rates, with an increase in divorce rates, an increase in the number of unmarried individuals, and a sharp change in family size dynamics. Islamic settings are not left out of the menace befalling families. However, the Holy Qur'an and Hadith (the sayings of the Holy Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) provide comprehensive guidelines on marriage, as they establish the foundation of the family and structure the fundamental unit of human society. The coherent maintenance of the human race depends on healthy families. Therefore, Allah advises his believers to get married for the sake of their moral, spiritual, social, and psychological well-being.

Traditionally, families with large family sizes and high numbers of children have quickly metamorphosed into families with one to two children. Polygamous families commonly associated with Islamic homes are giving way to monogamy instead. Perhaps this is due to the increase in family disintegration and disunity at home; however, the rich culture of family togetherness, unity, and peace concepts still plays a crucial role in Islamic homes. The basis of marriage is also changing, from love foundations and procreation to cohabitation, friends with benefits, sexual relationships outside marriage, and infidelities, among others. The advent of social media, with its unrestricted access, now allows individuals to access happenings all across the globe, serving as a point of learning and adopting foreign cultures in Nigeria, as well as within Islamic homes and other like-minded religions.

The family is a vital social institution with fundamental roles in society. Its pervasive role is evident in the lives of people in both pre-industrial and modern societies. The Islamic religion views marriage as a contract

between a man and a woman, intended to establish a stable family life and foster mutual love and respect. Islamic with a rich family culture characterised by a strong emphasis on family cohesion, respect for elders, gender roles, and community solidarity. Unlike some religions, Islam allows a man to marry more than one wife if he chooses to. For Islam, marriage has three purposes: to make it possible for a man and a woman to cohabit and share pleasure and love while adhering to Islamic law, to have children and raise them in a stable and morally upright setting, and to establish a formal union that protects society from social and moral deterioration.¹

Islamic Family Culture in African Settings/Context

Islamic with a rich family culture characterised by a strong emphasis on family cohesion, respect for elders, gender roles, and community solidarity. Practices such as extended family networks, communal dining, and regular religious observances play a central role in shaping the daily lives of Muslim families across the continent. The concept of 'Ummah,' or the global Muslim community, also influences how Islamic families interact with one another and with non-Muslims in their surroundings. Understanding the intricacies of Islamic family culture in Africa requires recognising the diversity of traditions and interpretations within Islam, as well as the influence of local customs and beliefs on family dynamics. By acknowledging the shared values of hospitality, generosity, and social responsibility between Islamic and Christian families, opportunities for interfaith dialogue and collaboration can be nurtured.

Kinship Structures

Once again, you will find that Islam provides guidance for all aspects of family life.² For both husband and wife to understand their respective responsibilities, their roles are clearly defined. Islam sees marriage as an equal relationship in which two individuals may cooperate, trust, respect, and be true to one another to obtain Allah's pleasure. Following the rules that Allah has established will allow you to have a fruitful collaboration. The well-being of women was a top priority for the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). He often counselled his disciples to be nice to their spouses. A prime example is his behaviour with his wives. According to a particular Hadith, the best of you are those who behave best to their wives; the most perfect believer in the matter of faith is he whose behaviour is best. No Muslim male should harbor animosity toward a Muslim lady. If he did not like something about her, he would find something else that he liked.

On issues relating to polygamy, more misunderstandings about Islam are created by this topic than by any other. Although polygamy, or taking many wives at the same time, is permitted by Islam, it is not encouraged. The only religion that restricted this long-standing and common practice was Islam. Earlier doctrines allowed polygamy to be unfettered and

¹ The official website of the Muslim Community

² Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, Gardens of the Righteous. Hadith (sayings of the Holy Prophet). Trans. Accessed 2025.

limitless. Islam prohibits the practice and restricts the number of spouses to a maximum of four. Allah declares: *But if you feel you may not be able to deal justly between them, then marry only one.* (Holy Qur'an, 4:4) If a man cannot be satisfied with one woman, it is better for society if he assumes full moral and financial responsibility for a second one. Adultery and having a mistress are grave sins that lead to the moral decline of society. Polygamy becomes necessary under certain circumstances, but only under certain conditions, and then with restrictions.³ A man can remarry if his wife is chronically ill and unable to fulfil the responsibilities of marriage, or if she is unable to bear children, or under certain conditions during wartime, terminal sickness or death cases. Islam permits divorce, but according to the Hadith, it is one of the most displeasing acts in the sight of Allah. The divorce procedure is designed to allow every chance for conciliation. Under Islamic law, divorce must be pronounced three times, with an interval of a month between each pronouncement. During this time, the wife stays in the family home, and reconciliation is encouraged.

Gender Roles

Every spouse has been given a specific duty in the marriage. "Our Lord is He Who gave unto everything its proper form and then guided it to its proper function," declares Allah in the Holy Qur'an. (20:51) Because of his greater physical and mental strength, men have been assigned to work outside the home as the breadwinner; similarly, women are physiologically and emotionally suited to bear children and have been given responsibility for raising them and keeping the house in order.

One partner has been assigned to oversee the smooth operation of the partnership. Allah has designated the husband to serve as his wife's "guardian" (see Holy Qur'an, 4:35). This does not grant him the authority to control or mistreat his wife; rather, it is a role that requires him to protect and support her. It only indicates that he must utilise his income to support the family and the home and that he is accountable for her welfare. His wife is supposed to obey him in exchange. A healthy relationship between a husband and wife requires mutual respect and collaboration. *They are a garment for you, and you are a garment for them,* declares Allah. (2:88) Holy Qur'an. In the same vein, a man and a woman should defend each other's dignity and values while also providing love, support, and understanding to help each other feel safe. They should safeguard one another's secrets and refrain from publicly exposing each other's flaws.

Rituals within Islamic Families

Clothing is worn to conceal flaws, to beautify, and for safety. The Qur'an advises that there should be a two-year interval between the birth of each child to allow the mother's body to rejuvenate (see Holy Qur'an, 31:15; 2:234). It also recommends nursing for two years to help achieve this.

³ Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, Gardens of the Righteous. Hadith (sayings of the Holy Prophet). Trans. Accessed 2025.

Abortion is forbidden as a means of birth control, although it is permitted if the life of the mother is in danger.

Birth control is prohibited if resorted to for fear of financial strain. Please remember also that the use of birth control to avoid the responsibility of child-rearing nullifies one of the primary reasons for marriage. This attitude is opposed to the spirit of Islamic teachings on marriage.

Comparative Analysis of Islamic and African Family Structures

The Islamic and African family structures share some similarities but also have distinct differences. This analysis will explore the similarities and differences between these two family structures.

Similarities

1. Extended Family: Extended family relationships are highly valued in both Islamic and African cultures. The extended family is viewed as a source of strength and support in Islamic cultures.⁴ Similarly, the extended family is frequently the primary social support system in African societies.⁵
2. Respect for Elders: Respect for elders is highly valued in both Islamic and African traditions. Elders are seen as sources of knowledge and direction in Islamic societies. Elders are also frequently respected in African societies due to their life experience and wisdom.
3. Peaceful co-existence: both Islamic and African families have regard and respect for human dignity, tranquillity, and empathy⁶. Regarding peaceful coexistence, both families aspire to live in harmony with each other, both within and outside the family.

Differences

1. Family Hierarchy: Islamic families are typically more hierarchical, with the father or oldest male being the head of the household⁷. In contrast, African families tend to be more egalitarian, with decision-making authority shared among family members.⁸
2. Marriage and Family Formation: Islamic families place a high value on marriage and family formation, with some cultures viewing it as a social and economic necessity.⁹ African families, on the other hand, tend to be more flexible concerning marriage and family formation, with some

⁴ Al-Krenawi, A., & Graham, J. R. *Culturally sensitive social work practice with Arab clients in mental health settings*. *Health & Social Work*, 25(1), 9–22, (2000).

⁵ Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann Educational Books. online accessed 2025

⁶ Buggenhagen, B. A. *Muslim Families in Africa*. In *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics* (pp. 537–554). Oxford University Press. (2012)

⁷ Al-Krenawi, A., & Graham, J. R. *Culturally sensitive social work practice with Arab clients in mental health settings*. *Health & Social Work*, 25(1), 9–22, (2000).

⁸ Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann Educational Books. online accessed 2025

⁹ Assaad, R. *The Evolution of Marriage and Divorce in Egypt*. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Economics of the Family* (pp. 235–254). Oxford University Press.(2010)

cultures practising polygamy or permitting more flexibility in family arrangements. African traditional families are polygamous by nature, while Islamic families may adopt the polygamous nature of their adherents.

3. Women's Role: Islamic households tend to see women's roles more traditionally, with a greater emphasis on domestic duties. African families, on the other hand, tend to view women's roles more flexibly, with women participating more actively in social and economic life by engaging in manual labour and assisting their husbands with farming.

Christian Missions in Africa: Historical Context

In the context of Christian missions in Africa, engaging with Islamic family culture presents both challenges and opportunities for advancing the mission. By respecting and learning from Islamic family values and practices, Christian missionaries can build bridges of understanding and trust with Muslim communities, fostering mutual respect and cooperation in their mission endeavors.

Moreover, recognizing the common ground between Islamic and Christian family cultures can facilitate meaningful dialogue on shared values, ethical principles, and social justice issues that are central to both faith traditions. This dialogue can lead to collaborative efforts in addressing everyday challenges faced by African families, such as poverty, education, healthcare, and social cohesion.

Islamic Family Culture and Implications for Christian Mission Advancement

Islamic family culture and African family heritage have a profound impact on Christian missions in Africa and globally.

Marriage and family structure: Growth in polygamy and family size: Because polygamy is permitted by Islamic law, Christian missionaries may find it challenging to encourage monogamous partnerships. The promotion of polygamy, which is also a cultural tradition in several African nations, may impede the expansion of Christian missionary endeavours. Growing families have an impact on missionary activity. For example, in the African religious environment, children are born into a particular faith, making it challenging to share the gospel with them.

Customs and practices: Islamic customs sometimes entail arranged marriages, which may restrict people's ability to select their spouses. The same problem, when a child is assigned to someone they may not like, is prevalent in many African contexts.¹⁰ This prevents them from making decisions based on respect for their parents rather than logic. When dealing with Muslim populations, Christian missionaries might have to deal with various cultural norms.

¹⁰ Kibicho, W. *Contextualizing Christian Marriage and Family in Africa*. Journal of African Christian Thought, 8(1), 2–12. (2015)

Divorce and Remarriage Orientation: Christian teachings on marriage and divorce may be influenced by the specific laws regarding divorce and remarriage in Islamic law. These variations may need to be addressed by Christian missionaries in their outreach initiatives.

African cultures frequently place a higher value on community-based decision-making than on individual decision-making. To conform to these cultural norms, Christian missionaries may need to modify their lessons on making personal decisions.¹¹ However, these cultures and family heritage can advance the mission of the Christian church when the following are adhered to:

Cultural Sensitivity¹²When dealing with Muslim and African populations, Christian missionaries need to have cultural sensitivity. Understanding local customs, such as marriage and family dynamics, is necessary for this.

Contextualization: To conform to local cultural norms, Christian missionaries must contextualise their teachings. This might entail modifying Christian marriage and family doctrine to conform to regional norms and traditions¹³.

Building connections: To gain credibility and trust, Christian missionaries need to develop connections with family members and local community leaders. Participating in regional traditions and rituals, such as going to weddings and other family gatherings, might be one way to achieve this¹⁴. For instance, taking into consideration the cultural traditions around polygamy and extended family ties, Christian missionaries in Nigeria have set up initiatives to assist widows and orphans.¹⁵

Christian missionaries in Kenya have adapted their teachings on marriage and family to incorporate regional traditions and customs, including the importance of deference to elders and community-based decision-making.¹⁶

¹¹ Buggenhagen, B. A. *Muslim Families in Africa*. In *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics* (pp. 537–554). Oxford University Press. (2012).

¹² Al-Krenawi, A., & Graham, J. R. Culturally sensitive social work practice with Arab clients in mental health settings. *Health & Social Work*, 25(1), 9–22. (2000)

¹³ Buggenhagen, B. A. *Muslim Families in Africa*. In *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics* (pp. 537–554). Oxford University Press. (2012).

¹⁴ Mbiti, J. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann Educational Books.(1969)

¹⁵ Kibicho, W. Contextualizing Christian Marriage and Family in Africa. *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 8(1), 2–12. (2015)

¹⁶ Ojo, M. A. Christian Widowhood in Nigeria: A Sociological Analysis. *Journal of Widowhood*, 10(1-2), 34–53. (2013).

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

This paper recommends that Christian missionaries need to understudy Islamic culture, especially family heritage.

This study recommends that Christian missionaries need to be sensitive to Islamic rites and way of life, including the things they do and what they do not accept, their dietary practices, and their cultural norms.

Christian missionaries need to be culturally sensitive, not judgmental, and should come out of their shell instead of thinking they have the truth alone.

Future research should focus on cultural sensitivity among Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria and Africa.

Conclusion

In conclusion, examining Islamic family culture as a heritage of African family settings provides valuable insights for advancing Christian mission in Africa. By embracing cultural sensitivity, interfaith dialogue, and collaborative engagement with Muslim communities, Christian missionaries can foster greater understanding, respect, and unity among diverse religious groups in Africa. This approach not only enriches the mission experience but also contributes to the promotion of peace, harmony, and social development in the region.

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