

Azra Akin, Agbani Darego, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Amina Nawal

On November 17, 2001, 18-year-old Agbani Darego from Nigeria was crowned Miss World. The finals were hosted by Jerry Springer and took place in Sun City in the heart of South Africa. Nelson Mandela was guest of honor. This year, pride prevailed over the usual criticism (1) of the event as a bikini-parade: Darego was the first black African Miss World, a shining example to many girls and women all over Africa, for whom having a fair complexion was still the highest ideal in beauty (2).

Darego, a resident of Southern Nigeria, made it specifically clear she's a Christian. Her very special thanks went out to "God, whom [she would] always remain grateful [to] for crowning [her] life with his love..."

Nigeria, after having lurched from one military coup to another, had had an elected leadership since 1999, when Olusegun Obasanjo came to power. But the political liberalization ushered in by the return to civilian rule allowed militants from the many different ethnic and religious groups (3) to express their frustrations more freely, and with increasing violence. Since 1999 thousands of people had died in communal rivalry, and separatist aspirations among some groups started to grow. The gradual imposition of Islamic law, Shari'ah, in twelve of the impoverished, predominantly Islamic, northern states solidified divisions and caused thousands of Christians to flee to the south after more than 3,000 had died in bloody protest marches. The Shari'ah courts imposed strict punishments, including floggings and amputations for transgressions like theft (4) and adultery.

On March 22, 2002, Amina Lawal, a 30-year-old Muslim woman, was sentenced to be stoned to death by a Shari'ah court at Bakori in Katsina State, northern Nigeria. Amina had confessed to having had a child while divorced. The man named as the father of her baby denied having had sex with her; the charges against him were dropped. Amina did not have a lawyer during her first trial, when the judgment was passed.



Later she filed an appeal against her sentence with the help of a lawyer hired by a pool of Nigerian human and women's rights organizations. But on August 19th, a Shari'ah court of appeal in Funtua took the decision to uphold the sentence of death by stoning imposed on Lawal. This confirmation shocked civil society in and outside Nigeria, especially all those who had been actively campaigning for the protection of Amina's rights.

On September 27, 2002, Amnesty International presented a 1.3 million-strong petition for Amina Lawal to the Nigerian officials of the London High Commission, presumably one of the biggest mobilizations in the history of the Internet. Amina Nawal's case cast a shadow over the Miss World 2002 pageant, to be held on November 30th in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. Candidates from France, Canada, Belgium, Ivory Coast and Norway threatened to boycott the competition if Amina's case was not resolved. Finalists from Costa Rica, Denmark, Switzerland, Panama and South Africa had already decided not to take part at all. Others who thought their presence in Nigeria might function as a statement in itself, fell prey to Christian and Muslim criticism of the event as a bikini-parade: showing bare upper legs was considered highly controversial in Nigeria. The Muslim community also opposed the date of the finals, which fell on the last week of the holy month of Ramadan. Preparation for the competition could only resume after the pageant was postponed to December 7th, and the Nigerian government delivered an official statement concerning Amina Nawal's prosecution:

"We restate that no person shall be condemned to death by stoning in Nigeria. [Nigeria will invoke] its constitutional powers to thwart any negative ruling, which is deemed injurious to its people (5)."

Amina, who could neither read nor write, did not have access to radio or newspapers in her village. She had never heard of Miss World before she was asked to give her opinion (6) on the boycott held in her honor by several of the world's most beautiful women. Still, she made it clear she wanted the show to go on: "Let them come. I know things will work out because people are coming from all over the world for me."

And so, the aspiring Misses ended up in the feminist camp, trying, as they claimed, to call attention to the rights of oppressed Muslim women, doing justice to the competition's latest slogan: "Beauty with a Purpose."

On Saturday November 16, 24-year-old Isioma Daniel, educated in England and a Christian, commented on the Muslim reaction to the Miss World spectacle in Nigeria's popular daily, *ThisDay*. "The Muslims thought it was immoral to bring ninety-two women to Nigeria to ask them to revel in vanity," she wrote. "What would [the Prophet] Mohammed think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from [among the contestants] (7)."

Daniel's article spurred immediate indignation within the Muslim community (8). Four days after its publication, on Wednesday, November 20, mosques in the northern city of Kaduna officially called for demonstrations against *ThisDay* and the Miss World contest.

More than 200 people were killed in the riots that followed. Thousands became homeless or wounded. Twenty churches and eight mosques were destroyed, and *ThisDay's* headquarters in Kaduna were burned down to the ground. On Friday, November 22, despite a formal apology from *ThisDay*, the riots spread to Abuja. Outside the city's biggest mosque demonstrators yelled "Down with beauty!" while a short distance away, the Miss World contestants were kept hidden under tight security in the Abuja Nicon Hilton Hotel.

On November 23, the Miss World organization decided to move the final competition to London, "for the sake of the nation," as the pageant's spokeswoman, Stella Din, put it. The disappointment over losing the competition hit Abuja hard; the prospect of billions of viewers worldwide being introduced to Nigeria's touristic splendor went up

in smoke. Investors, including the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, the Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development, Nigeria Airways and first lady Stella Obasanjo's Child Care Trust, lost an estimated 10 billion Naira (9). Agbani Darego claimed to be "shocked," and the Nigerian organizers of the beauty pageant, Silverbird Productions, called the situation "a national disaster." President Obasanjo claimed the media were responsible for the controversy over the Miss World pageant.

In the northern state of Zamfara, a fatwa was called upon Isioma Daniel by Mamuda Shinkafi, deputy governor of that state. Shinkafi on national TV: "Any true Muslim would make sure that this woman's blood is spilled wherever she is." Though the legitimacy of the fatwa was disputed by Muslims all over the world (Daniel was not a Muslim herself, and had apologized through her employer, *ThisDay*), Daniel resigned from her job and fled to the United States.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, another young woman was threatened by radical Muslims for her outspoken ideas.

A brief biography: Ayaan Hirsi Ali was born in Somalia in 1969. Her father, a political activist, had to flee the country in 1975 for criticizing its dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, and took the family to Kenya. Despite her strict fundamentalist Islamic upbringing, Ayaan was allowed to attend school, but per her grandmother's wish she was circumcised and married to a cousin at the age of 20. She later escaped to the Netherlands where she studied political sciences, became board member of Amnesty International, then started working for the Wiardi Beckman Foundation, the scientific research center of the Dutch 'Labor Party' PVDA. The focus of her research became the position of Muslim women in the Netherlands.

For 20 years, left wing governments had tried to integrate immigrants into Dutch society under the motto "integration with respect for individual identity," resulting in hundreds of state-funded Islamic schools, aid organizations and refuges. Hirsi Ali stated that these institutions contributed to the segregation of Muslim immigrants from Dutch society, while overlooking the underlying socioreligious mechanisms that kept Muslim women's problems (circumcision, arranged marriages, illiteracy, social and financial dependency, isolation, torture) intact. Hirsi Ali proposed a radical cultural change, an enlightenment from within Muslim society, a society she claimed compulsively blamed others for its own problems. These issues were traditionally not discussable amongst left-wing cultural relativists. Hirsi Ali argued they had been

fighting for the emancipation of western women, but left Muslim women out in the rain: “As an immigrant, the Labor Party keeps telling me I have a right to my own backwardness (10).”



When Hirsi Ali renounced Islam after September 11, 2001, her father, who lived in London, started receiving threats on her life, mostly coming from Somalian refugees. In the year that followed, Hirsi Ali's position grew trenchant. Where her party, PVDA, made a distinction between extremist and moderate Muslims, she explicitly blamed Islam, both as a culture and as a religion, for the abuse of Muslim women. Threats on her life increased and in late October 2002, Hirsi Ali left Holland, and with financial support from the Beckman Foundation, fled to the United States, like Isioma Daniel. There she wrote a controversial article about a controversial career move: she would leave the PVDA to join the VVD, the right-wing liberal party.

From the right wing, reactions went from enthusiastic (“She's right leaving PVDA. They should be sued for racism and discrimination (11)”) to skeptical (“She's just a ruthless opportunist (12)”). From the left some warned Hirsi Ali (“She should realize that not only Muslim fundamentalism is a threat to our society, so is right-wing radicalization. Her statements can easily be misused by racist cells (13)”), while others wished her luck (“Integration means immigrants don't stay isolated within their minority group, but decide independently with whom they wish to associate (14)”).

On December 2nd, Hirsi Ali was inaugurated to VVD's electoral (15) congress and thus became what critics called “Holland's first electable right-wing Apology Ali.” In neo-populist, post-9/11 Holland, traditional left wing or right wing positions within the

existing political relations could no longer be taken for granted, even (or especially?) where the rights of Muslim women were concerned.

On December 7, 2002, Miss World was broadcast in 142 different countries from London's Alexandra Palace to what the organizers claimed was a global audience of more than two billion viewers. During the show a brief pause was held—at the contestants' request—to remember Amina Lawal. The winner was Miss Turkey, 21 year old Azra Akin, a third generation Turkish immigrant born and raised in Almelo, a small city in the East of the Netherlands. Azra took the crown and £100.000 (16), leaving 92 contestants behind her. Miss Holland Elise Boulogne, her roommate in Abuja and London, came in 14th place.

In a delirious ceremony Agbani Darego put the crown of victory on Azra's head. Azra told reporters afterwards that she had been shocked by the violence in Nigeria, adding, "I wish people in the world would be more respectful to each other."

Azra Akin became the first Muslim Miss World.



In Almelo, reactions to Azra's victory were mixed. Neighbors decorated her house with the Dutch flag saying "We couldn't find a Turkish one..." *Tubantia*, a local daily, hosted lively chat-sessions on its website. "If she wants to be Turkish, let her go to Turkey," one reader complained. Another answered "She's one of us. Tulips once came from Turkey too, you know..." Nilgün Yerli, Turkish columnist for Amsterdam's daily *Parool*, stated Azra would never have had a chance to any representative

function had she been educated in Turkey: "This beauty who speaks four languages is a present to Turkey from the Dutch educational system."

In Turkey, however, the welcome was unanimously warm. Azra, who was taught her very basic Turkish during a summer course after she learned she had been elected Miss Turkey (17), was welcomed by prime minister Gül in person, while the newspaper *Hürriyet* decorated its front-page with her portrait (in bikini): "a perfect example of the modern, secular Muslim woman." The popular daily *Milliyet* headlined: "Azra leads Turkey into EU."

But a week later, Turkey's hopes for a date for EU membership were shattered: on December 18, during the EU Expansion-summit in Copenhagen, a large majority of EU-members voted against Turkey's accession, mainly citing the state of human rights in Turkey as a reason. America's president George W. Bush had been trying to influence Copenhagen's decisions up to the last moment in favor of Turkey, which was of strategic importance to the United States as it was preparing for an eventual attack on Iraq (18). Not only was Turkey's border with Iraq's oil-rich north important, but Bush also feared that, following a rejection by the EU, disappointed Turks might easily fall prey to Muslim fundamentalism.

Miss World organizer and co-founder Julia Morley must have thought along the same lines when she was asked to react on the riots in Kaduna and stated: "I believe that the world needs tourism and not terrorism."

Footnotes:

1. Protests did not always remain verbal: in 1970, feminists threw bags of flour during the event at London's Royal Albert Hall, chasing host Bob Hope off the stage. In 1996, during the finals in the Indian city of Bangalore, police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at rock-throwing protesters, and one man committed suicide by self-immolation.
2. Whitening crèmes for dark skin were very popular but risky: severe skin diseases, wounds and scars were no exception. Critical Nigerians had blamed Miss World for promoting solely western beauty values: tall and skinny, while in most African countries voluptuous women were considered more attractive. Most African Miss World contestants would have their hair straightened, and many of them had their noses narrowed down by operation.
3. 250 Different ethnic and religious groups on a population of 120 million. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country.
4. The minimum stolen amount prescribed for amputation would be \$8, or "the price of a goat."
5. The Federal Minister of Justice himself declared Amina's sentences unconstitutional yet he refused to intervene directly, presumably to keep more riots from breaking out; 'till this day (1/21/03) the charges against Lawal have not been officially dropped.
6. On October 16th, 2002, Amina was brought from Katsina, where she was kept in prison without visitors, to the Italian Embassy in Abuja to meet with Elisabetta Zamparutti and Sergio D'Elia, representatives of Hands of Cain, and Roberto Giachetti and Benedetto Della Vedova, members of the Italian Parliament. The Italian delegation had come to express their concern with Amina's situation. On October 23rd Sergio D'Elia sent Julia Morley an official letter with excerpts of the conversation with Amina.
7. In her critical article titled "Miss world 2002: The World at their Feet," Daniels also summed up which other groups besides the Muslims opposed the beauty pageant:

The pragmatic wondered what the point was in spending so much money (...) on something as cursory as a beauty pageant when there are (...) collapsing businesses, galaxy-wide unemployment (...) and poverty, which are not being given half as much commitment as a beauty pageant. Also, the contest is taking place in (...) two states, in a 36 state federation (...). For the rest of Nigeria, every morning these women spend in the country would not make a direct impact on (...) their lives. Most of the contestants come from privileged western countries like Holland and Australia.
8. Most Muslims said their attention to the (in their opinion) offending article was drawn through text messages on their mobile phones.
9. 10 billion Naira = approximately \$800 million (22-01-03).
10. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, 'De zoontjesfabriek', page 55.
11. Chat forum JOVD (VVD's junior branch), <http://www.jovd.com/forum/>
12. Chat forum Stadspartij (City Party) Rotterdam, <http://www.stadspartij.nl/forum/>
13. Eric Krebbers, 'Bedreigde Ayaan Hirsi Ali verdient linkse steun' on <http://www.defabel.nl/>
14. Bart Tromp, The Hague City Council member for PVDA, on <http://www.denhaag.pvda.nl/>
15. The right-wing coalition of CDA (Christian Democrats), VVD and LPF (the right wing populist party Lijst Pim Fortuyn) had fallen over internal struggles in the LPF in October 2002, five months after the elections. In the months preceding the new elections of January 2003 both VVD and CDA struggled for the votes of disillusioned LPF followers, each trying to appear as right-winged as their party's programs would permit them.
16. £100.000 = approximately \$1.6 million (22-01-03).
17. Confused Turks watching Azra on TV: "Instead of 'Mutluyum' ('I am happy') she said: 'I am Mutlu...'"
18. Northern Iraq is mainly inhabited by Kurds. The oil fields around the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk have been subject to struggle between Turkey, Iraq and Kurds on either side of the border (who want to found an independent state) since the end of World War I.