

# FILLING THE POTHoles: FROM THE “ALUWANKA” TO THE “GARDEN OF BLISS”

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***Abstract:** Since social change has impacted Muslim marriages, traditional pre-marital counselling is being influenced by the formalized one. But the establishment of a pre-marital counselling centre by a woman in the Muslim community is what aroused the interest to investigate this phenomenon. This paper discusses the practices of the Aluwanka (traditional pre-marital counsellor) and assesses the formalized type by Hajia Memuna Maliki. We argue that though Hajia Memuna Maliki has attempted to bring pre-marital counselling to the Muslim community particularly women, she faces several challenges as with any new development and must be assisted by stakeholders to perform better.*

**Key Words:** Aluwanka, Marriage, Hajia Memuna Maliki, Bliss, Potholes, Pre-marital Counselling

## **Introduction**

Marriage plays a significant role in the foundation of the family; which is the basic unit of society. Ghanaian Muslims counsel couples before marriage in order to provide the soon to be couple with techniques of handling marital issues so as to help sustain marriages. The bride is specially counselled by an *Aluwanka* on ways of attaining a successful marriage. In contemporary times, the effectiveness of this traditional practice has been questioned because of the challenges Muslim families face. The General Secretary of *Ahlu Sunnah wa Jama'a* (ASWAJ) in Ghana, Sheikh Abban whose outfit deals with conflict resolution in the Muslim community, lamented about how the community witnesses an increase in elaborate marriage ceremonies before Ramadan, but these are followed with marital disputes which ends in divorce and recommended counselling as a remedial measure. Fulera Issaka<sup>1</sup> corroborates this and points out that, although ASWAJ deals with different complaints, marital issues ranks high.

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<sup>1</sup> Fulera Issaka, “Gender-Based Violence in the Nima Muslim Community,” M.Phil Thesis (Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon 2010).

Latifa Abobo Sidique's conclusion<sup>2</sup> that many marriages in the Somanya area are rather associated with merrymaking affirms the theory that; "Most couples spend more time preparing for the wedding than they do preparing for the marriage;"<sup>3</sup> and confirms that preventive counselling is better than remedial counselling. The question is; if pre-marital counselling takes place, what accounts for the challenges with marriages and what efforts are being made to improve the existing methods? Social change has impacted marriages; similarly, the traditional practice of pre-marital counselling has been influenced by formalized pre-marital counselling. But the establishment of pre-marital counselling centres in the Nima/Mamobi Muslim community and the involvement of a woman in this enterprise is what aroused the interest to investigate this phenomenon. This paper is based on research carried out in the Nima/Mamobi Muslim community of Accra between 2010 and 2013 using the phenomenological approach. Information was garnered mainly from observations of practices of the *Aluwanka*, marriage ceremonies, and formalized pre-marital counselling sessions, discussions with Imams, Muslim scholars, family members, both prospective married couples and married couples who had patronized formal premarital counselling.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this paper is threefold. First; it discusses the traditional practices of the *Aluwanka as a counsellor*, and identifies the pot holes. It then assesses the formalized pre-marital counselling centre by Hajia Memuna Maliki and its attempt to provide a more effective marriage counselling. Finally, the paper makes recommendations for the way forward. It is noteworthy that pre-marital counselling is a technical term, but it is used loosely in this paper to refer to the traditional practice where pieces of advice are given to prospective couples before marriage by different categories of people.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf., Latifa Abobo Sidique, "Pre-marital Counselling in Islam: A Case Study in Somanya Zongo", Long Essay (Department of Religious Studies, Islamic University College, Ghana 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Julie Macfarlane, *Islamic Divorce in North America: A Sharia Path in a Secular Society* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 2012), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Kauthar Khamis, "Sustaining Muslim Marriages: Pre-Marital Counselling in the Nima/Mamobi Muslim Communities," M.Phil Thesis (Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana 2013).

## Pre-marital Counselling

Sociologically, marriage is defined as the union of a man and woman to live together for either companionship, procreation or both. In Islam, marriage (*nikah*) is a divine institution described “as the union of two natures or two souls which are one in their essence.”<sup>5</sup> The Prophet highly recommended it for those who have reached the marriageable age and have the means to do so.<sup>6</sup> Particularly because *zina*, i.e. illicit sexual relations have been criminalized,<sup>7</sup> marriage requirements have been simplified to enable Muslims enter into it and establish families which then provide the atmosphere for nurturing, socialization and human development. From the Islamic perspective therefore, the role of the family to development in this life and the hereafter is significant particularly because it is considered an act of worship. Consequently it should be taken seriously and sustained since it is accountable for in the life hereafter.

Marriage counsellors such as Gary R. Collins<sup>8</sup> and Esther O. Ayandokun<sup>9</sup> posit that as a human institution, and a bond between two individuals with different orientations, marriage is bound to face challenges. To avert this, prospective couples must be taken through counselling to assess their personalities better to enable them confront challenges in their relationship;<sup>10</sup> to educate couples about how to survive pressures; and to equip them with the needed skills to enhance the marital relationship, among others. Pre-marital counselling therefore seeks to prevent rather than provide a remedy. Through the attendance of different sessions of counselling under supervision by a professional counsellor for a specific period of time on a broad range

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<sup>5</sup> Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Religion of Islam* (Columbus: The Ahmadiyyat Anjuman Isha'at Islam; 1990), 447.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sahih Bukhari vol. 7, book 62, nos. 3 and 4. Abdul Hamid Sidiqi, *Sahih Muslim: Book of Marriage* (New Delhi – India: Adam Publishers and Distributors; 2008), 339.

<sup>7</sup> Qur'an, 17 v 32

<sup>8</sup> Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counselling: A Comprehensive Guide* (Milton: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 534.

<sup>9</sup> Esther O. Ayandoku, *Counselling Made Easy: Vital Hints on Caring for People With Marriage Spices* (Lagos, Nigeria: Gloryline Christian Publications, 2010), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Atiemo O. Abamfo, *Walking Towards the Altar: A Pre-marital Counselling Manual for Ghanaian Churches* (Accra: Qolyns –Skan Multimedia Limited, 2011), 13.

of topics, prospective couples are assisted to understand and sustain the marriage.

### **Islamic Pre-Marital Counselling**

Pre-marital counselling is strongly embedded in the Islamic marriage system that enables couples meet the objective of marriage to make it everlasting and rewarding<sup>11</sup>. The Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) have given guidelines for individuals to follow in the selection of spouses,<sup>12</sup> the conduct of the prospective couple before, during and after marriage; sharing of responsibilities and financial obligations in the home; conflict resolution; style of parenting, sexual relations and communication among others. The concept of pre-marital counselling therefore is not new to Islam. It is undeveloped as a science.

Somayya Abdullah's argument that Islamic counseling is not an explicit exercise, but alluded to the religio-cultural rituals of Muslim communities in various forms provides a theoretical framework for this paper. Situating counselling within a cultural discourse, she distinguishes between Islamic cultural counselling and professional modes of Islamic counseling as a formal discourse, using predominantly Western counselling paradigms and models. According to her, because Islamic counselling and psychotherapy from a professional perspective is of recent origin, vaguely defined and unstructured for actual implementation to be monitored, it requires guidelines that can be integrated into a theoretical framework.<sup>13</sup> Like Somayya Abdullah, Hussein Rassool whilst acknowledging the challenges of divorce in the American Muslim community, interrogates the Eurocentric nature of counselling that American Muslims go through as devoid of Islamic contents.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Qur'an, 30 v 21.

<sup>12</sup> The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) advised that social status, wealth, beauty and character may be considered but recommended character. Beyond the physical, *Istikhara* (a specific ritual prayer) also provides a spiritual means through which one may seek Allah's guidance for a suitable partner.

<sup>13</sup> Cf Somayya Abdullah, *Islamic counseling and psychotherapy: Trends in theory development*. <http://www.islamcity.org/3549>. Accessed May 31, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Hussein Rassool, *Islamic Counselling An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (East Sussex: Routledge, 2016) chapter 13.

The challenges of Muslim marriages, high incidence of divorce, and the need to work out Islamic ways of counselling has pushed some Muslims such as Imam Mageed Muhammad of the Adams Centre to provide formalized Islamic pre-marital counselling to help sustain marriages through the two main types of pre-marital counselling: educational and private.<sup>15</sup> Whilst the educational type deals with the rudiments of marriage and preparation towards it for those who have attained marriageable age and is organized en-mass, the private type involves only the prospective couple and the counsellor. In the private sessions, the discussions are on issues such as communication, parenting style, the role of the extended family, conflict resolution, sex and financial planning among others.

For Imam Mageed pre-marital counselling is “a preventive measure to help people understand marital relationships, the responsibilities that come with it and their expectations of one another.”<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding the efforts to work out alternative models to assist Muslims, as argued by Somayya Abdullah, because the discipline is not grounded theoretically, scholars must work out authentic forms of professional counselling moulded on the Qur’an and the Sunnah to provide guidelines for the Muslim community.

### **Pre-marital Counselling in the Ghanaian Muslim Community**

Traditional pre-marital counselling takes different forms and fits into Somayya Abdallah’s concept of cultural Islamic counselling. Accordingly, family members offer pieces of advice to prospective couple particularly the bride, during the marriage ceremony<sup>17</sup>. Among the Dagombas of Northern Ghana where fostering by the paternal aunt is considered central to holistic preparation for a successful marriage, training based on practical examples predominate. The girl is given pieces of advice with the view to groom her for marriage so she does not carry inappropriate behaviour to the husband’s house and bring dishonour to the family.

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<sup>15</sup> [www.isna.net/...Islamicperspectiveofcounselling](http://www.isna.net/...Islamicperspectiveofcounselling). Accessed, November 20, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> [www.isna.net/...Islamicperspectiveofcounselling](http://www.isna.net/...Islamicperspectiveofcounselling). Accessed, November 20, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Abobo Sadique, “Pre-marital Counselling,” 38.

Friends and relations also share experiences with particularly the bride, informally prior to the celebration of the marriage and after (*buday kay*)<sup>18</sup> which is characterized by pieces of advice like; ‘when you go humble yourself and be patient’; ‘marriage is not sweet; it is full of challenges.’ Muslim Imams and scholars reduce their roles to officiating with little counselling on the day of solemnization, which does not afford ample time for detailed discussions of important issues. Also, due to the absence of the couple at the ceremony they miss out on the sermon and pieces of advice.<sup>19</sup>

One person who performs a key role in the process is the *Aluwanka*. It is a term that originated from Kotokoli and Hausa. *Alu* is a Kotokoli word meaning old woman while *wanka* in Hausa means bath. Literally it means “the old woman who baths.” As an elderly and experienced woman in marriage, she applies the henna on the bride, teaches her the ritual bath (*ghusl*) and counsels her before marriage. According to Enid S. Childkrout, henna usage is an Islamic practice recommended by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) for purification and protection against evil spirits.<sup>20</sup> Traditionally, the *Aluwanka* literally bathed the girl as they were married off at an early age and had no knowledge of this.<sup>21</sup> She therefore provided the bride the opportunity to learn this act before been taken to her husband. However due to increased awareness of Islamic teachings on *awrah* (privacy), this practice is unacceptable in contemporary times.<sup>22</sup> That Muslim brides are now taking the bath without the *Aluwanka* is an indication of social change.

The major issues the *Aluwanka* discusses with the bride revolves around the “toxic subjects” and other elements; good house-keeping and financial management, cooking for both husband and in-laws, respect for in-laws, the use of discretion in the choice of friends, submission, respect, patience and avoidance of things that could threaten her marriage. As part of conflict management *Aluwankas* advise brides to

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<sup>18</sup> This literally means the removing of the veil and also the act of taking the accoutrements of the bride to the husband’s residence after solemnization.

<sup>19</sup> Abobo Sadique “Pre-marital Counselling,” 39.

<sup>20</sup> Enid S. Childkrout, *People of the Zongo; the Transformation of Ethnic Identities in Ghana* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 172.

<sup>21</sup> Qur’an chapter 4: 43 which commands ritual bath.

<sup>22</sup> The part of a person’s body which is not supposed to be exposed to anybody safe the spouse and in critical or exceptional cases.

apologise and say sorry to husbands and avoid arguments with them. Symbolic language plays a role through the use of the stool to connote permanency of marriage; the bride must ‘sit and stay’ in the marriage through values such as submission, humility and obedience. In other instances brides are presented with a broom stick that symbolizes cleanliness and a ladle to connote cooking and the importance of food in the house always. Primarily the emphasis is on the bride’s responsibilities to the husband and relatives because she is the home-maker.

### “Pot holes”

“Pot holes” abound in the practice of the *Aluwanka* and other counsellors. The nature of traditional pre-marital counselling is one-sided and focuses on responsibilities of the bride to the neglect of the groom’s duties. Moreover, the absence of the groom during solemnization creates the impression that he is not counselled before marriage. But the instructions on humility, obedience, respect and saying sorry etc; directed at wives-to-be are all indications of traditional mentalities towards women as subordinates. Unsurprisingly, Muslim women like other women in traditional society, have been socialized to feel subordinated through mis-interpretations of Qur’anic verses.<sup>23</sup> This reflects the patriarchal nature of Ghanaian society and the traditional Islamic understanding of gender relations.

Additionally, the *Aluwanka* and others make little reference to sex explicitly. But as Rev. Akwasi Sarpong argues, the main reason for marriage is satisfaction of the sexual desire and procreation. Thus, the neglect of sex-related matters in traditional pre-marital counselling is unacceptable and obnoxious; for sex is one of the main things that ‘make marriages tick’.<sup>24</sup> In traditional Ghanaian society, sex is considered a taboo. Coupled with the interpretation some Muslim societies have put on the Qur’anic prohibition of ‘*zina*’<sup>25</sup> to mean ‘do not talk about sex,’ it implies that sex- education and related matters that equip married couples to take responsibility for sexual relationship have been relegated to the background,<sup>26</sup> regardless of its importance

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<sup>23</sup> Qur’an 4 v 34.

<sup>24</sup> Akwasi Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect* (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 77.

<sup>25</sup> Qur’an 17 v. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Linda R. Bennett, “Sex Education: Zina and the Enigma of Sex Education for Indonesian Muslim youth,” *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning* 7 (2007): 380.

in Islam.<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding the Islamic position on sexual satisfaction as a right conferred on married couples<sup>28</sup> in many African and Muslim societies, women cannot negotiate and enjoy sex.

Despite the short comings of this traditional system, marriage ceremonies are not performed without these advisors. It is the inadequacies of the services of the *Aluwanka*, negative practices pertaining to marriages, i.e.; gender based violence and perceived high incidence of divorce that have propelled one Muslim woman to establish The Garden of Bliss Marriage Counselling Centre (GBMCC) to educate women on marriage and offer pre-marital counselling. Hence the sub title of this paper: “From the ‘*Aluwanka*’ to the Garden of Bliss.”

### **The Garden of Bliss Marriage Counselling Centre (GBMCC)**

The Centre was established by Hajia Memuna Maliki, co-founder of the Islamic Charity Centre for Women Orientation (ICWO). Having actively engaged in the *dawah* (Islamic propagation) activities of ICWO and the Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Ghana (FOMWAG) she was exposed to the challenges of Muslim women in the Nima-Mamobi community. Lamenting on the high rate of conflicts in Muslim marriages, with some 80% of marriages ending in divorce within the first year<sup>29</sup>, (though unsubstantiated by Hajia Maliki) there was the felt-need to rectify the situation. Using ICWO, she began to educate couples on the importance of sustaining marriages and the need for couples to be present at the ceremony to benefit from the pieces of advice.

Using the educational type of counselling, she proceeded to educate her members on a pilot basis and then spread her message to other communities in Accra. This culminated in the establishment of the ‘Garden of Bliss Marriage Counselling Centre’ (GBMCC) at the premises of al Banat School, Mamobi.<sup>30</sup> Untrained in pre-marital counselling, she tutored herself through readings on marriage and

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<sup>27</sup> Al-Dien Muhammad M. Zain, “Perception of Sex Education Among Muslim Adolescents in Canada,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no.3 (2010): 396.

<sup>28</sup> Abdessamad Dialmy, “Sexuality in Islam”, *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care* 15, no.3 (2010): 162.

<sup>29</sup> We believe this figure is an exaggerated one that is not grounded in any scientific research.

<sup>30</sup> The Centre is now in the offices of FOMWAG, Abavana Down.

different aspects of counselling.<sup>31</sup> Through radio and television presentations on marriage and family life she gained more experience.

Hajia Memuna Maliki has since 2006 worked as a marriage counsellor, providing pre-marital counselling services in the Muslim community in Accra. The word ‘Bliss’, the motto (‘Happy marriage, successful marriage;’) and the slogan (‘be a cook in the kitchen and a harlot in bed’) were carefully chosen.<sup>32</sup>

According to her, the word ‘Bliss’ was to reflect the objective of marriage as an institution supposed to create a happy home and analogous to a beautiful garden. She contends that the achievement of such happiness demands preparation through pre-marital counselling which in her view, does not adequately take place in the community. The project (GBMCC) is therefore essentially calling on Muslims to treat pre-marital counselling seriously to attain ‘Bliss’.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, The motto; ‘Happy marriage, successful marriage’ was coined to help Muslims build a happy and long lasting family. She disagrees with critics of the slogan; “be a cook in the kitchen and a harlot in bed’ as offensive, explicit and sensual.

Since food and particularly sex, are essential components of marriage, a woman must know how to cook as “the best way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” She argues that, essentially the sexual instinct must be satisfied and therefore, her active participation in it, like a harlot would give pleasure to her client, and not passively lie in bed like a piece of wood is desirable. This way the couple will enjoy sex.

Also she contends that because passiveness has the potential to drive the husband outside the home to find sexual pleasure, it creates problems. So though the Qur’an and Sunnah, especially the latter are replete with material on sexuality and the ethics of sexual intercourse and foreplay, upon which good sexual satisfaction in marriage is

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<sup>31</sup> The Nigerian Pastor Bimbo Odukoya’s Book *Marriage: Real People Real Problems* (Dallas: Xulon Press, 2008), and some articles on pre-marital counselling from the internet assisted in her understanding of the discipline.

<sup>32</sup> The centre has a logo of a coconut that has been split into two. The fruit of the coconut symbolizes pure white with no dirt and represents love and transparency. In her understanding for marriage to be peaceful there must be love and trust.

<sup>33</sup> Kauthar Khamis, “A Case Study of Islamic Charity Centre For Women Orientation,” Long Essay (Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, 2008) 33.

dependent,<sup>34</sup> women are vilified when they demand good sex.<sup>35</sup> For her, it is hypocritical for Muslims to consider sex a taboo. Consequently she has incorporated sex-education into her counselling services to fill the gap.

### **Procedure and Contents**

Normally, clients who report at the centre provide their bio-data at a specified fee after explanation of requirements and agreement of terms to the couple. Hajia Memuna Maliki then familiarises herself with the couple/bride and impresses on them/her the need for a systematic program ranging between three to six months for in-depth discussion of various topics. Depending on whether the client has already set the date for the marriage ceremony, she adapts the program and concentrates on essential topics such as; good and effective communication, trust and understanding in marriage, financial management and sex related issues. She has a structured programme, syllabus and provides clients with notes and illustrations when necessary.

The preparatory stage deals with enquires about clients' background and their understanding and expectations of marriage, as a professional counsellor would do. In these sessions she meets the clients separately to appreciate their personalities and unique traits to enable her adopt the appropriate techniques. She then explains the differences in the biological make up of the sexes and appreciation of cultural differences to promote compromise, tolerance, respect and acceptance as important elements for any successful marriage.

According to her, if prospective couples follow the fundamental elements of marriage which include among other things; communication, understanding, trust and care, the marriage will thrive. In her opinion communication leads to unity, without which there would be no trust. D. Wayne Matthews has explained communication as the process of sharing messages, ideas, attitudes and feelings to an extent that the sender and the receiver have an understanding of what is being expressed.<sup>36</sup> To this end, couples must be conversant with the different

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<sup>35</sup> Marisol Seibold "Muslim marriage counselor called Satan after saying married women should enjoy sex." Accessed February 14, 2012. [https://www.jihad\\_watch.org/2012/02/muslim-marriage-counselor-called-satan-for-saying-women-should-enjoy-sex](https://www.jihad_watch.org/2012/02/muslim-marriage-counselor-called-satan-for-saying-women-should-enjoy-sex) ACCESSED 2016-06-27

<sup>36</sup> www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pdfs/FCS466-2.pdf-United States. Accessed 24 February 2013.

types of communication, and also listen attentively to the other. For her effective communication enables the couple to understand, correct and sustain the relationship. She describes marriage without trust founded on communication as “just like sitting on a time-bomb which can explode at any time,” and reiterates the need for couples to be truthful and confide in each other.

According to Hajia Memuna Maliki because this mechanism is an important tool in marriage and its lack a root cause of problems, she continuously advises her female clients, not to cease communication with their husbands, even if their husbands stop doing so. Even if husbands cease, wives should find humble ways of communicating to bring peace. Her advice to women is to eschew arrogance and rather apologize to husbands when they commit offences.

One of the striking features of the program is the patronage by women, though in a few instances a couple go for counselling throughout the session; men do not patronize the Centre for chauvinistic and other reasons. Procedurally, both individual/combined sessions were held when it involved the couple during which, the biological make up as male and female; how to identify their likes and dislikes; tolerance, communication and the acceptance of partners for what they are, were discussed. One couple narrated how Hajia Memuna Maliki explained that because certain aspects of a person’s character cannot be changed overnight, spouses must be patient and not expect miracles in the transformation of attitude and mentalities.

According to the prospective bride, in addition to topics that dealt with her responsibilities such as cooking and ensuring that her husband’s food is always ready on his return home; learning to say ‘thank you’, ‘please,’ ‘I am sorry’ to ensure peace, the separate session with her hammered on sex and her role during the sexual act. According to this client Hajia Memuna Maliki advised her to be neat at all times, smell good and actively participate in the sexual act to enjoy it. Interestingly, her obsession with the issue of sex did not commensurate her encouragement for medical screening for diseases and blood group compatibility to enable couples make informed decisions about their health as Atiemo advises.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Atiemo, *Walking towards the Altar*, 48-9.

Responses from clients show the benefits they have derived from the Centre with some claiming that they were applying the lessons to their marriage. Some disclosed what they had gained from the lessons on personal hygiene, management of homes, and practical demonstration of how to prepare local dishes and now have a positive attitude to sex. Peaceful relationship with in-laws was another area that proved invaluable for some clients. One client felt more reassured and confident after the lessons on expectations as a daughter in-law and has had no problem with her in-laws.<sup>38</sup> In this particular instance she was advised to dress modestly during her visits to the in-laws in order not to create the impression that her husband was lavishly spending on her and occasionally offer gifts. On the basis of their satisfaction, some clients hoped to recommend her services to others.

### **Leave your ‘Book long’ in the House**

Without doubt the incorporation of communication and aspects of sex in her sessions is a departure from the traditional system of the *Aluwanka*. Because sex-related issues are rarely discussed in the community, Hajia Memuna Maliki’s endeavour, has broken cultural barriers and promoted Islamic practice.

This notwithstanding, the contents also reinforce gender stereotypes as evident in an address she made at the reception and presentation of a client’s certificate.<sup>39</sup> She said; “you women must leave your book-long behind when you go into marriage.” “Book-long” has a negative connotation for women in relationships. It means that regardless of the educational background of a wife, she must submit to the husband. This is demoralizing, as education plays a critical role in the attainment of the ‘Bliss’ she anticipates for the couple as sound education

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<sup>38</sup> For this woman she had been intimidated by the comments of her mother in-law who stated that her son was the financier of the family. The in-law had told her that she would hold her responsible, if on marriage the support ceases.

<sup>39</sup> The presentation of certificates is done at the marriage reception to testify that the couple (or one of them) has gone through pre-marital counselling and also advertise the programme to prospective couples.

bears on the quality of marriage.<sup>40</sup> Like the *Aluwanka*, she impresses upon women to be submissive and passive in the marriage. This is unsurprising as Hajia Memuna Maliki is of the *Ahlu-us Sunna wa Jama'* that is noted for conservatism.

## Challenges and Way Forward

Response to this emerging phenomenon is mixed as expected with any new practice. It is wrongly considered by some as Christian and *bida* (innovation) which should not be imitated.<sup>41</sup> For some the period within which counselling takes place creates the atmosphere for sexual immorality *zina* (*fornication*). But its unworthiness is manifested in the attitude towards the counselling services of a male counsellor, who explained that Muslims are used to *fisabilillah* and anticipate free things and expect such services to be *pro-bono*.<sup>42</sup> The attitude towards the Centre should be appreciated against this context, though other challenges were compounded by male chauvinism. Whilst some men attended the sessions with their prospective wives initially and withdrew on the pretext that, the engagement with the woman was uncomfortable on sensitive issues as sex, others claimed they would rely on male scholars for that service. This has led to the bride focused approach.

Hajia Memuna Maliki is providing services based on sincerity and passion that come with associated risks and probably doing the wrong things with passion and sincerity. Undeniably, passion for marriage counselling and marriage experience alone does not make a marriage counsellor *par excellence*. As explained by Michael J. Sporkowski, it is the requisite professional training that ensures competence.<sup>43</sup> Thus, a Muslim counsellor must not only be trained, but also have deep insights into the Qur'an, Sunna and other disciplines for effectiveness delivery, she does not fit into this category. No wonder the services are equally fraught with "potholes": unprofessionalism and attitudinal. Even with the incorporation of several topics into the

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<sup>40</sup> We are aware also that education per-se does not make marriages successful.

<sup>41</sup> This position is un-acceptable, for Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) taught the search for knowledge wherever it may be. Hence, Muslims may borrow from other cultures, provided it does not contradict the essential and cardinal principles of Islam.

<sup>42</sup> Khamis, "Sustaining Muslim Marriages."

<sup>43</sup> Michael J. Sporkowski, "Assessment and Diagnosis in Marriage and Family Counselling," *The Journal of Counseling and Development* 74 (1995): 62.

program, it is still limited in scope. The issue of marriage as a contract and a potential polygamous union and how this should be handled particularly by the bride to whom much of the counsel is directed, and domestic violence are not addressed. Again the silence on the procedures for dissolution of marriage and its implications; and the subject matter of Registration of Muslim Marriage gives the impression that she is not abreast with state laws. These areas are significant in creating an Islamic content.

But insufficient funds, inability to commercialize the venture and low patronage even by Muslim women have stifled the growth of GBMCC. Over the ten years period of its existence, GBMCC has had some 105 clients. Yet, Hajia Memuna Maliki is not deterred and continues to solicit for sponsorship from benevolent individual Muslims and organizations to enable her buy airtime to educate the community. The extent to which this will materialize is yet to be seen. But the partnership with FOMWAG and the use of the latter's offices as the new Centre is a good sign. As an amateur with self-acknowledged weaknesses, her attempt at capacity building through the attendance of workshops is commendable; but her zeal to share her experiences with others to sustain the operations of the GBMCC is visionary.

## Conclusion

The paper set out to examine the traditional practice of pre-marital counselling as symbolized in the *Aluwanka* and the emerging new trend to formalize it. This was done against the backdrop of challenges of Muslim families and the need to militate it. We noted among other things that technically the *Aluwanka* is not a professional counsellor; rather she offers pieces of advice like others in an informal manner. These pieces of advice are important notwithstanding the inherent "pot holes," and though it falls short of the demands of professional counselling, it is authentically Islamic and rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Hajia Memuna Maliki's venture into this enterprise presents an interesting development. Like the *Aluwanka*, she is not professionally trained and a certified scholar. Thus, her quasi 'scientific' approach and incorporation of new areas into her program to improve the traditional system, is still beset with problems some of which are attitudinal. Though she has managed to plugged some holes, she has created

others. Yet, because this bold attempt is commendable, she must be helped for effective delivery. Likewise, *Aluwankas* and Imams should also be introduced to pre-marital counselling. To this end, stakeholders in the community should seriously consider ways of institutionalizing the practice along Islamic lines.

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