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**"BLACK GIRLS RULE!"**

What a tantalising theme to conjure with. It was whilst pondering upon this theme my thoughts went to Baroness Amos, a frequent face on British news broadcasts. Hers was the face that we saw on our television screens after the terrorist attack on Bali, representing the British government. Interviewed at the time on BBC television via satellite link-up by Sir David Frost, with his typically over-egged "penetrating" technique, the Baroness calmly put the interviewer in his place. Grace under pressure—truly a "black girl ruling."

**BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR 1.7 BILLION PEOPLE**

Baroness Amos is a British foreign minister, one of five reporting to Jack Straw, the UK's foreign secretary. She is one of the UK government's spokespersons in the House of Lords on Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs as well as the principal spokesperson on International Development.

The scale of her responsibilities is daunting to say the least. Baroness Amos has responsibility for Africa, the Caribbean and Britain's Overseas Territories. Baroness Amos is responsible for the Commonwealth policy of the UK Foreign Office. The Commonwealth represents the interests of over 1.7 billion people, a group of 54 developed and developing countries.

**FROM GUYANA TO UK; ACTIVIST TO BARONESS**

Valerie Amos was born in Guyana and came to England when she was nine years of age. She studied sociology at the University of Warwick, contemporary cultural studies at Birmingham and then a research project at the UEA. She was awarded with an Honorary Professorship at Thames Valley University in recognition of her work on equality and social justice and holds honorary doctorates in Law from the Universities of Manchester, Warwick and Staffordshire.

She left university with the belief that in order to change things she had better get into a position where she could affect change. She began working in local government before heading up the Equal Opportunities Commission from 1989-94. Amos was appointed a life peer, i.e. a Baroness, in August 1997. A peerage used to be hereditary, historically from a narrow section of British society. However, since 1958 it became possible to be made a life peer nominated by the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition and appointed by The Queen.

**THE ONLY WAY TO CHANGE THINGS IS TO BE INVOLVED**

I asked Baroness Amos what she would suggest to those of us considering a political career. "If you really want to make a difference, the challenge can be onerous, demanding hours late into the night with your day job the next morning." Clearly, there is challenge here in that for the House of Lords to be a modern instrument for British society it has to be accessible to members that represent the cultural and social diversity of the country. As Baroness Amos says, "There is a debate going on now concerning how people get into the House, whether they are appointed or whether there's a voting procedure, all of these things will affect how people get in here."

**GLOBALIZATION IS REALITY**

I asked Baroness Amos about her views on globalization "I think we have to accept that globalization is a reality as opposed to a concept. Given that parts of the world are forming themselves into greater trading alliances we have to work out ways in which we can harness some of the undoubted benefits of globalization to actually help developing countries."

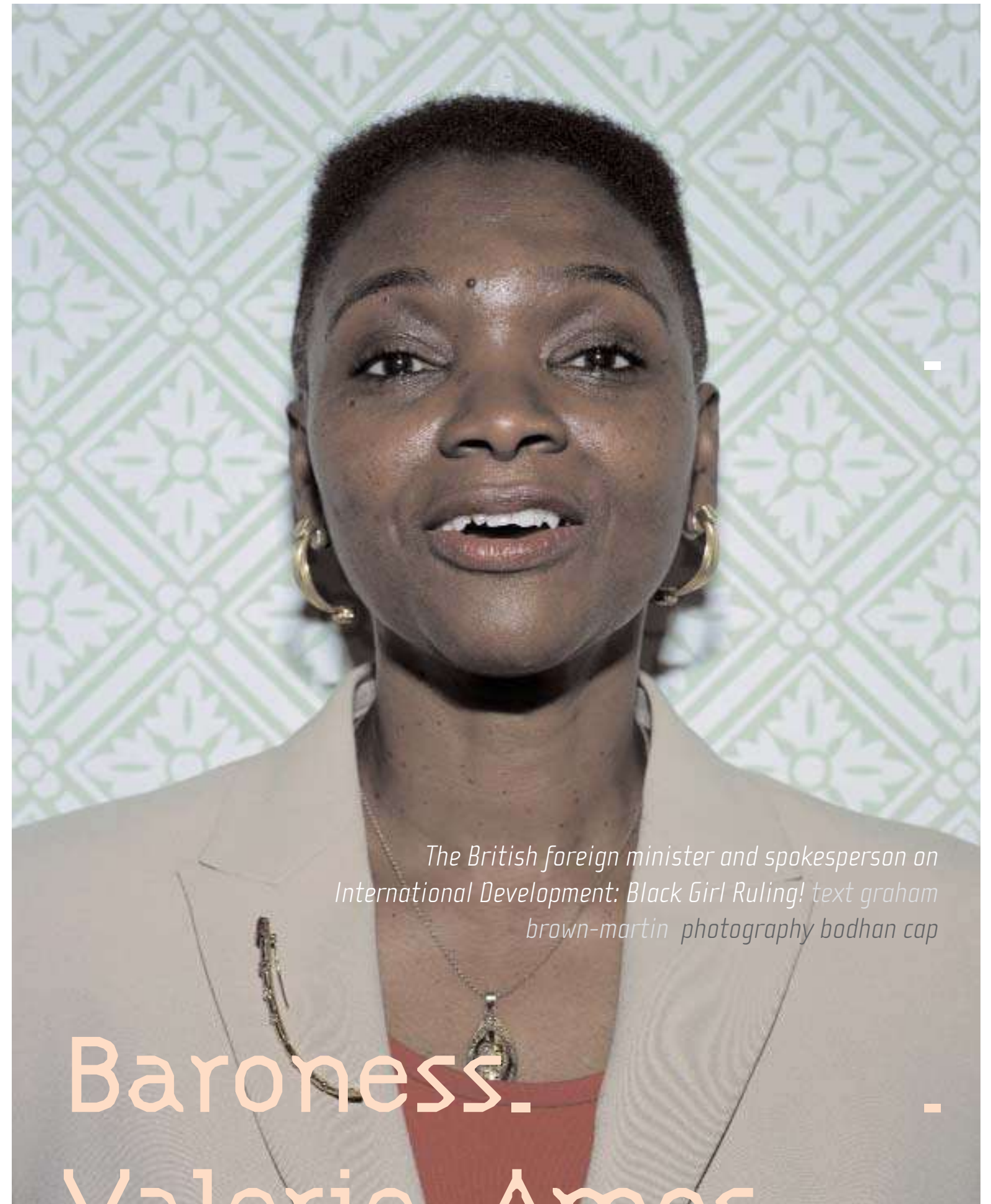
**CULTURAL INTERVENTION**

I was curious about the opinion of Baroness Amos on the position of Britain's role in influencing other nations' affairs. I was interested in the recent case in Nigeria where 30 year old Amina Lawal, was found "guilty" under Sharia, or Islamic Holy Law, for bearing a child out of wedlock. Her sentence is death by stoning. The question is: do we have a right to intervene in such circumstances?

"We have to be very careful when we're talking about somebody else's culture. The federal legal system in Nigeria believes that the Sharia code is illegal, but they can't actually rule that until a case is brought before the federal supreme court. I think our influence is through things such as the Commonwealth. When I was in Nigeria not only did I mention this issue with the President, I also had a meeting specifically about Sharia Law with a number of people from different facets of Nigerian society. What became absolutely clear was that this was not simply about culture but about politics where in Nigeria you have a predominantly Muslim north and a Christian south with a fight for power between the two. Sometimes I think that things are called 'cultural,' which are much more complex than that: many members of Nigerian society and women are really concerned and want the support of the international community."

And at that point the Division Bell rang calling the Lords to vote and Baroness Amos was back to work. ■

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*The British foreign minister and spokesperson on International Development: Black Girl Ruling! text graham brown-martin photography bodhan cap*

Baroness.  
Valerie. Amos.