Women and Islamisation - Carving a New Space in Muslim Societies

Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland

R 1997: 3

Recent CMI Reports

R 1995: 5	SELBERVIK, Hilde Beate	
	Et lite offer? En analyse av årsakene til de diplomatiske bruddet mellom Norge og Kenya i 1990. Bergen, December 1995, 172 pp. (Price NOK 145 + postage)	
R 1996: 1	STOKKE, Huge and Marit TJOMSLAND	
	Collective identities and social movements. Bergen, 1996, 35 pp. (Price NOK 50 + postage)	
R 1996: 2	TVEDTEN, Inge	
	Angola og norsk bistand. Bergen, 1996, 98 pp. (Price NOK 90 + postage)	
R 1996: 3	DONNELLY, Jack and Rhoda E. HOWARD	
	Human rights self-monitoring: A proposal for the Northern European Democracies. Bergen, 1996, 27 pp. (Price NOK 50 + postage)	
R 1996: 4	WIIG, Arne	
	Handel og arbeidsstandarder: Barnearbeid. Bergen, 1996, 30 s. (Price NOK 50 + postage)	
R 1996: 5	GEORGALA Steven and Arne TOSTENSEN	
	Mobilising resources for regional integration in Southern Africa - Towards a SADC capacity-building fund. Bergen, November 1996, 58 pp. (Price NOK 90 + postage)	
R 1996: 6	ATKINSON, Keith and Arne TOSTENSEN	
	Whither Nordic/SADC relations? Bergen, November 1966. 49 pp. (Price NOK 50 + postage)	
R 1996: 7	BREKKE, Hilde and Hilde SPERREVIK	
	CMI bibliography 1965-1996. Bergen, November 1966, 274 pp. (Price NOK 145 + postage)	
R 1996: 8	RAKNER, Lise	
	Botswana - 30 years of economic growth, democracy and aid: Is there a connection? Bergen, December 1996, 53 pp. (Price NOK 50 + postage)	
R 1997: 1	TUFT, Eva Irene	
	Democracy and violence: The Colombian paradox. Bergen, March 1997, 122 pp. (Price NOK 125 + postage)	
R 1997: 2	TJORE, Gro	
	Utdrag av norsk flyktningdebatt 1985-1995. Eit styrande perspektiv? Bergen, april 1997, 102 pp. (Price NOK 90 + postage)	

A complete list of publications and Annual Report available free of charge

For priced publications:
Surface mail (B-economique) free with prepaid orders. For airmail (A-prioritaire) outside the Nordic countries add 20 %

Four easy ways to pay:
Cheque, issued in Norwegian kroner
Post office giro, paid by International Giro: 0808 5352661
SWIFT: DNBANOBB, Den norske Bank no: 5201.05.42308
Credit card: VISA only

Order from:
Chr. Michelsen Institute
Fantoftvegen 38, N-5036 Fantoft-Bergen, Norway
Fax: + 47 55 57 41 66 Phone: + 47 55 57 40 00 E-mail:
cmi@amadeus.cmi.no

Summary

The diversity in Muslim women's religious practices and positions within contemporary resurgent Islam, often referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism", has so far been given little attention. The different chapters in this volume describe gendered practices and female participation in a number of groups related to Islamic movements. We analyse how the muslim component of a woman's identity is made relevant in new ways for self-understanding and pragmatic choices in every day life. The analytical arguments and ethnographic data presented seek to dislocate understandings of Islamist and Islamic "fundamentalism" that analyse the movement mainly as a reaction against "Westernisation" and modernisation".

Women and Islamisation - Carving a New Space in Muslim Societies

Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland

Indexing terms
Islamism
Sufism
Women
Algeria
Iran
Jordan
Morocco
Senegal
Turkey

Contents

Preface

This collection of papers originates from a seminar organised around the theme *Construction of Gender relations in processes of Modernisation - Women and Islamisation* at Chr.Michelsens institute. The seminar received funding from the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs co-sponsored the work on editing and publication of the papers. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support received from the above mentioned agencies and institution.

Much of the material has been changed since the original seminar, and some of the participants who presented papers and contributed to the development of arguments in the seminar in late 1994 have for various reasons been unable to publish their papers in this volume. We like to thank Trude Eide, Aynur Ilyasoglu, Kirsten Sandborg, Heidi Skramstad and Annika Rabo for their contribution to the seminar that encouraged the advancement of the project! Three of the chapters in this volume written by Marjo Buitelaar, Willy Jansen and Soroya Duval have been included by invitation.

The different chapters in this volume grapple with the understanding of persons, groups and phenomena that in Western popular and scholarly presentations often are defined and presented under the label 'religious fundamentalism'. We probe what unites these groups apart from *our* ascription of a specific negatively defined identity to them by the attributes non-modern, non-democratic, ir-rational.

To highlight substantive differences and similarities among the groups presented we attempt to give meticulous ethnographic descriptions of how religious and ritualistic devotions and practice form an important part of present-day life of certain categories of women in Muslim communities from Senegal to Jordan. Implications of the analysis presented of women's active involvement in Islamist practices and organisations presents us for several paradoxes; Why do women seek their submission under religious authority and dogma that deprive them of free judgement and command over specific areas of their life ? How is the believing female subject constituted in one of the world's major patriarchal religions? Are there specific pragmatic gains in the secular realm for the women seeking religious involvement ? How may religious merit be converted into secular prestige? The dominant approach to understand the contagious effect of Islam is to appeal to extra-religious factors produced by a sense of threat from the dislocation wrought by modernisation and explain the attraction of Islamic movements as a reactive response to the impure West, that is, one seeks to bolster and protect own identity by purifying religious practice. A common ground for the different papers presented at the seminar was to seek to explain ways practicing Muslim women cultivate and seek an active voice in religious discourse.

All of the ethnographic cases presented in various ways highlight the active creation of rooms of their own by the women engaged in Islamist revitalisation - encountered in their particular socio-historical realities. The implications of the cases presented and the questions we raise mark an opposition to generalisation where women's relation to Islam is reduced to its victims par excellence. Our analytical approach seek to conceptualize the ways that religious involvement by women challenge traditional representations of gender and articulates interests through self presentation and identity management that also challenge restrictions imposed from above that curtails women's freedom in the name of religion.

We explore how women are engaged in lifeprojects that are encompassed in and regulated by religious dogma and ritual practice. Attempting to give reasons for women's active involvement in Islamist practices and organisations presents us for paradoxes; Why do women seek their submission under a system that deprives them of their free will and power. So, what is in it for the women seeking religious discipline ? One approach to understand the contagious effect of Islamisation is to appeal to the extra-religious appeal produced by a sense of threat from the impure west, that is one seeks to bolster and protect own identity by purifying religious practice. All of the ethnographic cases presented in various ways show the active creation of rooms of their own by the women engaged in Islamist revitalisation - with this focus on practice we wanted to mark opposition to a reduction of questions on women's relation to Islam as its victims par excellence.

The unifying analytical approach aspires to conceptualize ways that religious rituals and beliefs challenge dominant representations of gender in traditional Islam through creative, voluntary reworking and presentations of self in religious discourse. In this subdominant discourse female identity management emerge also as counteraction to restrictions imposed that curtails women's freedom in the name of religion.

Notes on contributors

Karin Ask is social anthropologist and Research fellow at Chr.Michelsens institute. She has been doing basic and applied research in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Her publications include: "Veiled experiences:exploring female practices of seclusion" in Kirsten Hastrup & Peter Hervik (eds.)*Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge* (1994 London,Routledge) and "Ishq aur Mohabbat: contrastive ideas on love and friendship in a northern Pakistani Community" in T.Bleie, V.Broch-Due and I. Rudie, (eds.) *Carved Flesh/Cast Selves:Gendered Symbols and Social Practices* (1994 Oxford, Berg publishers)

Dr. Marjo Buitelaar is cultural anthropologist and works as assistant Professor at the Centre for Religious Studies of the State University of Groningen, The Netherlands. She is active in research and teaches on the subject of Anthropology of the Middle East and Islam. She has published numerous articles in Dutch and English on women in muslim culture and society. Among recent publications are "Widow's worlds. Representations and realities" in: J. Bremmer & L. van den Bosch *Between Poverty and Pyre. Moments in the history of Widowhood* ,(1995) London & New York, Routledge. "Between oral tradition and literacy. Women's use of the holy scriptures in Morocco" in: A. Fodor & A. Shivtiel (eds.) *Proceedings and Colloquium on Popular Customs and the Monotheistic Religions in the Middle East and North Africa.* Special issue of The Arabist. Budapest Studies in Arabic 9-10, Budapest. She is the author of *Fasting and Feasting in Morocco. Women's participation in Ramadan* (Oxford, Berg publishers 1993)

Soroya Duval is a Research fellow affiliated to the Department of Theology and Religious studies at Lund University Sweden. She did fieldwork for her Ph.d. thesis in Cairo among female participants in Islamic groups.

Dr. Willy Jansen is Professor of women's studies and director of the Centre of Women's studies at the University of Nijmegen. Her main anthropological research was done in Algeria, which resulted in the book *Women without men. Gender and Marginality in an Algerian town* (1987 Leiden E.J. Brill). Her current research deals with the history of women's education in Jordan, changes in gender identity during the life course and women's multiple identities.

Dr. Zahra Kamalkhani is Social anthropologist and Research fellow at the Centre for Feminist research in the Humanities at the University of Bergen, Norway. Among her recent publications are "Women's everyday religious discourse in Iran" in H. Afshar (ed.) *Women in the Middle east* (1994 London: Macmillian press

Ltd). Her doctoral dissertation with the title *Women's Islam religious practice among women in todays Iran* is forthcoming (1997 London:Routledge)

Dr. Catharina Raudvere is assistant Professor and teaches history of religions at the Faculty of Philosophy, Linköping University. She has previously written on Old Norse mythology and Scandinavian folklore but has in the last years developed scholarly interest in Muslim groups in Turkey and is at present conducting fieldwork among female dervisjes in Istanbul. Her disciplinary training is as an etnofolklorist. Among her recent publications are "Now you see her, now you don't: some notes on the conceptions of female shape-shifters in Scandinavian tradition" in: Sandra Billington & Miranda Green (eds.) 1996 *The concept of the Godess.* She has published on her present research in various articles, e.g. "To decide her own way. Female Dervishes in Istanbul" (1996 in Swedish)

Dr. Anne Sofie Roald is a Research fellow affiliated to the Department of Theology and Religious studies at Lund University Sweden. Her doctoral dissertation is called *Tarbiya: Education and Politics in Islamic Movements in Jordan and Malaysia* (1992, Lund, Lund Studies in History of Religions Vol.3)

Dr. Eva Evers Rosander is a senior Research fellow at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, Sweden and Associate Professor in Social Anthropology. She has done extensive fieldwork in northern Morocco and Ceuta on women and social and economic change. Recently she has been studying Sufi Women (Murids) in Senegal and their religious associations. She has published *Women in a Borderland. Managing Muslim Identity where Morocco meets Spain.* (1991;Stockholm SSSA) Together with David Westerlund she is editing a book on *African - Islam : Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (1997; London: Hurst and Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute)

Marit Tjomsland is NFR stipendiate at the Chr. Michelsen Institute, currently working on Islamism and social modernisation in Tunisia. Among her publications are The Educated Way of Thinking: Individualisation and Islamism in Tunisia" in: M. Masst, T. Hylland Eriksen and J. Helle-Valle (eds): *State and Locality* (1994) and *A Discussion of Three Theoretical Approaches to Modernity: Understanding Modernity as a Globalising Phenomenon* in CMI Working Paper series 1996.

Introduction

Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland

What is Islamism? More than fifteen years have passed since the Iranian revolution first revealed the potential power of this phenomenon and elevated it from a status as one scarcely recognised religious interpretation among others to a mass mobilising force at the centre of the world's attention. Since then, it has come to play an increasingly important political role in more Muslim countries than not, and it has become part of everyday language way beyond the Muslim communities of the world. On a general level, most people - with the eager assistance of the mass media - have acquired a layman's understanding of the concept based on images of extremism and women's oppression, guns and veils. On a specialised level and thus more interesting in this connection, social scientists, orientalists, and most other research disciplines dealing with the Muslim World have during the last fifteen years produced an abundance of studies of the phenomenon. Still, one has as yet failed to reach a general understanding of what it *is*; in fact, there may be reason to argue that one today is as far from a clear and unanimous comprehension of it as ever before. This is evident already at the most basic conceptual level: A multitude of concepts are currently applied to connote the phenomenon, some of the more frequently used being Islamic fundamentalism, Islamism, Islamic resurgence, political Islam, and radical Islam. The different valeurs of these concepts clearly indicate that divergent perceptions of the phenomenon are at play. In addition, there is a sizeable field of conceptual derivatives of what will here be called *Islamism*. *Islamisation*, which is a central focus of the contributions to this book, is one such derivative, and refers not so much to organised political expressions of the phenomenon as to wider impacts - cultural, religious, or others - it has come to have on contemporary Muslim societies. How can one make sense of this jungle of approaches to apparently the same phenomenon?

Attempts at explaining Islamism may be usefully categorised according to what aspects of the phenomenon they give importance to. While some concentrate on what has brought Islamism about, thus seeking the 'real' reasons behind the Islamic resurgence, others focus on the ideas and practices it implies, applying a basically descriptive approach. The first of these approaches tended to be more widespread in the Eighties, while the latter has been gaining ground during the Nineties. This shift in emphasis over time should be understood in a broader theoretical context: The Iranian revolution was the first in a row of political events of international dimensions which forced the social sciences to seriously reconsider

central established truths about the nature of social development. It was the first major 'incomprehensible' popularly supported take-over of power of the post-colonial era, in the sense that it contradicted the until then hegemonious classical theory of modernisation, which approaches modernisation mainly as a historical and ideological process first undergone by the West but necessary anywhere if development is to be reached, and at the same time as a self-evident good which all societies will aspire to achieve. The Iranian revolution provided a first time experience with a popular revolt seemingly aiming at retreating to a previous stage of development, voluntarily stepping off the path to modernity. Thus, Islamism from the beginning was labelled an anomaly, a deviation, and as a consequence, the initial theoretical approaches to understanding Islamism tended to focus on what had gone wrong. One were looking for the causes *behind* the Islamist revival, for the 'real' problem of which Islamism was perceived to be a symptom.

Analyses of Islamism presented within this frame of understanding vary considerably with regard to the causes they identify as crucial in having brought the derailment about. However, for instance Dekmejian's (1985) approach to Islamism as result of *crises* in relation to modernisation processes is representative of a bulk of the contributions. From this analytical point of departure he seeks to explain both individuals' disposition for supporting what he chooses to term *Islamic fundamentalism,* states' disposition for developing a fundamentalist mass movement, and Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab World as a whole. Some of the key crises in his analysis on the two latter levels are those of identity, misrule, military impotence, and culture (Dekmejian 1985:7). Such crises constitute, according to Dekmejian, the underlying, 'real' causes of Islamic fundamentalism as mass movement. On the individual psychological level, he identifies personality traits like alienation, complexes of inferiority, aggressiveness, authoritarianism, paranoia and several more equally unattractive features as characteristics of the fundamentalist Muslim (1985:33-35). Thus, his theory is one of social and psychological defects, of modernisation - in the classical sense - gone wrong.

Daniel Pipes (1983) represents an other way of approaching this empirical field. His main hypothesis is that high oil-prizes have produced the current resurgence of what he, too, prefers to call Islamic fundamentalism. He bases his analysis on the fact that most Islamist movements are subsidised by Saudi Arabia, Iran or Libya, subsidies afforded by these states due to their large oil resources. Their regional political ambitions make support to neighbouring countries' Islamist movements instrumental in that it keeps their rivals busy with internal political problems. Hence, to Pipes Islamic fundamentalism is basically a political artefact which existence depends on the economic state of the international oil-market as much as on anything else, and thus without a genuine belonging in modernising Muslim societies.

Though representing distinctly different ways of explaining Islamism, these two examples of early analytical approaches to Islamism have a lot in common. First, they tend to concentrate on what makes Islamism *occur*. On an aggregate level they seek to explain what makes Islamist movements spring into existence, and if operating on an individual level, they look for what makes people become

2

Islamists. Considering that these studies were conducted at a time when the bulk of contemporary Islamist mass movements were in creation, they can hardly be blamed for this. However, one should keep in mind that what makes a phenomenon *spring* into existence not necessarily is the same that makes it *stay* in existence. Second, and in spite of due remarks about the complexity of the phenomenon of scrutiny, they tend to trust their analysis to one-factor explanations. Pipes concentrates on oil wealth, while Dekmejian focuses on modernisation crisis. Finally, and connected to the above mentioned problem, they both treat Islamism as a substantially homogenous phenomenon. That is, it is a precondition of their studies that Islamism everywhere is result of the same or very similar processes, and that it rises and decreases everywhere for the same or very similar reasons. Moreover, it is assumed that all expressions of the phenomenon contain some basic elements, among which anti-Western sentiments hold a central position. When drawing on a perception of modernity as a basically Western phenomenon, the conclusion that Islamism is also anti *modern* is thereby close at hand. This is, however, a problematic conclusion in the sense that many Islamist movements do in fact not perceive themselves as anti modern - on the contrary, the project of developing an *Islamic* modernity is central to quite a few of them. Needless to say, they have a different understanding of modernity, characterised by a separation of its 'hardware' - its technical and scientific achievements - and its 'software' - the social and cultural aspects of modernity as it exists in the Western societies. Accepting the hardware, they are reluctant to the software - the atomization of society, consumerism, what they perceive as moral decay - and seek to develop their own modern cultural code, based on the values of Islam.

This brings us to the question of how one may most usefully understand modernity. Central to the already mentioned ongoing process within the social sciences of redefining this concept is the recognition that contemporary modernity is a genuinely global phenomenon. Global modernity is characterised by certain fundamental characteristics, but has at the same time taken on culturally specific forms, depending on the local contexts within which it exists. As a consequence of this empirical *fait accomplis,* it has become necessary to reconsider the assumption of an inherent connection between modernity and the Western civilisation that until recently dominated this field. This is being done in various ways. For instance, Antony Giddens - a central contributor to this project - detaches modernity from the specific Western context by focusing on the *institutions* of modernity rather than on its historic and cultural origin. Modern institutions are, according to Giddens, based on certain fundamental preconditions, such as the separation of time and space that is a necessity for the modern perception of time as 'empty', independent from what happens during it and where it happens. Closely related to the time-space separation is the *disembedding* of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space (1990:21). Thus, it is the de-connection of society from a specific setting, the 'stretching' of social relations, which to Giddens is at the core of modernity, and which makes it both a continuously changing and

genuinely global phenomenon. Such a 'virtual' way of approaching modernity differs quite radically from the conventional approach, and makes it possible to a much larger extent than before to relate to the thought of modernity as a culturally diverse phenomenon. Consequently, it also opens up for new ways of understanding the relationship between Islamism and modernity, and encourages approaches focusing on variety and complexity rather than normative studies applying the Western project as template for 'correct' modernity.

This is not to say that the analytical approaches such as those of Dekmejian and Pipes are invalid. Their problem is not necessarily in choice of explanatory factors, but rather in their tendency toward excluding others. As contemporary Islamism is maturing in the Nineties, it becomes increasingly clear that its complexity is so vast that one-factor approaches to it are meaningless - in fact, it appears to be so complex that one may question the usefulness of treating it as one single phenomenon at all. This is a view supported also by people at the inside of the movements. For instance, Rashid Ghannouchi, the leader of the Tunisian Islamist movement *En-Nahda*, defines an Islamist as a militant Muslim. Beyond that, he acknowledges no substantial commonalties uniting the different contemporary Islamist movements (interview 1996). Correspondingly, Francois Burgat, French social scientist symphatetic to the current Islamic resurgence, defines Islamism as 'the recourse to the vocabulary of Islam, used in the post-colonial period to express within the state, or more often against it, an alternative political program that uses the heritage of the West as foil, but allows nevertheless the reappropriation of its principal references ' (1993:41), thus portraying it as a basically rhetorical framework drawing on Islamic concepts as alternatives to Western ones, and applied by highly diverse political projects to reach highly diverse political ends.

The diversity within the cluster of movements commonly referred to as Islamist has a number of sources. First of all, it is evident that movements spread across a geographical and cultural area as vast as the Muslim World unavoidably will be coloured by their respective local contexts. Furthermore, as basically political projects, most of them are developed as response to concrete national political settings, which further diversifies them. Moreover, within such national political settings the status of the movements vary radically, from guardians of state ideology, like in Iran or Sudan, via positions as legitimate political opposition, like in Jordan or Turkey, to an existence as criminalised rebels, like in Tunisia or Algeria. Obviously, such differences in status are likely to lead to differences in choice of strategy as well as in the ideological appearance of the movements. In addition, in a number of Muslim countries there exists a variety of different Islamist movements with competing political interpretations of Islam; this further complicates the picture. It should also be added that a considerable difference in political and religious views seems to exist in many movements between the elite and the common symphatisers. And last but by no means the least, as Islamism is maturing into an established factor of influence in many Muslim societies, the demarcation line between the Islamists and the 'others' becomes increasingly blurred, due to the process of *Islamisation* of society. This process is characterised

4

by a general strengthening of the Muslim identity, and takes various forms: Regimes adopt aspects of Islamist ideology and generally emphasise their respect for Islam as a strategy to increasing popular support, women adopt what originally was the Islamist dress-code without meaning to state more by that than that they consider themselves sincere Muslims, traditional forms of worship such as sufi-movements integrate new religious ideas in their repetoir, public discourse takes place within an increasingly religious rhetorical framework, and so on. Thus, Islamisation refers to the increasing number of recently developed politico-religious hybrids and syntheses between the new and the old, the popular and the intellectual, the local and the universal which characterise a majority of contemporary Muslim societies. Furthermore, this process of renewal more than anything else suggests that the initial perception of Islamism as a derailment from the path of modernisation may be erroneous, and rather poses the opposite question of whether it was the after all quite brief period of post-colonial 'normal' process of modernisation that was the anomaly. At the very least, it ought to lead to a shift in focus of interest of the social sciences from the occurrence of Islamism to its existence as an established, influential aspect of contemporary Muslim societies.

Ernest Gellner has suggested that the current revitalisation of religion in Muslim modernising societies, which contradicts the conventional perception of secularisation as central aspect of modernity, may be explained in terms of the ancient division between the scripturalist 'high Islam' of the scholars and urban elite and the less correct 'low Islam' of the basically rural commoners. The relationship between these two versions of Islam has historically never been dynamic. 'High Islam's' attempts to convert the adherents of 'low Islam' have only temporarily been successful, as tradition and folk belief have always re-conquered the minds of the commoners and brought the process back to square one. The recent modernisation of Muslim societies has, however, finally put an end to this infertile circle, as it has removed what 'low Islam' has been feeding on for centuries, traditional mind and society. This is, according to Gellner, the background for Islamism's - as the currently most vital expression of 'high Islam' - astonishing strength and vitality. Modernisation decreases the part of the population inclined to identify with 'low Islam', but since 'high Islam' provides a more sophisticated religious interpretation attractive to the growing modernised parts of the population, Islam does not suffer from the secularisation that has come with modernisation in other religions (1992:22). The dichotomy of 'high' and 'low' Islam is too simplistic and thus misleading as a presentation of the religious state of affairs in the Muslim world. All the same, Gellner's argument adds an interesting perspective to the current processes of Islamisation. Islamism, as a vital version of 'high Islam', seems to serve as a sort of 'database' from which modernising Muslims in search for fulfilment of personally felt needs for meaning pick and choose what best serves their purposes. While some are content with fragments of it, others adopt Islamist ideology to a fuller extent. At least in the latter case, opting for Islamism as a way of life appears to be a modern phenomenon: In more cases than not, adherence to it seems to be result of

5

personal choices made by individuals, often in spite of the attitudes of social surroundings, and in line with personal conviction, and is thus the act of profoundly individualised modern human beings. In that sense, little separates adherents of the Islamist movements from the followers of any other modern social movement. When it comes to more fragmentary application of Islamist ideas, or Islamisation, the variation in motivation and purpose is so vast that few valid generalisations can be made. However, one rather interesting general point should be mentioned: Attempts at generalising these matters appear to be rather irrelevant for a majority of those actually involved in the current processes of Islamisation, and the urge to classify and define them according to concepts like Islamism or Islamisation seems to be significantly stronger in the West than in the areas where they actually have an impact. An illustration of the point: In Tunisia, no parallels to these concepts exist in daily language - in stead, one will tend to apply concepts like 'the religious' or 'the brethren', which both have their own distinct meanings. Concerning the various expressions of the process of Islamisation, one will tend to perceive them as separate phenomena, and generally grant them an independent existence. This is not to say that concepts like Islamism and Islamisation are useless. It is, however, a reminder that they should be applied with caution, and with awareness that they are analytical constructs rather than descriptions of actually existing empirical phenomena.

Thus, grasping the total picture of contemporary Islamism, let alone Islamisation, is not only an unrealistic ambition, but also one that builds on a wrong perception of the issue at hand. We find the provision and comparison of concrete expressions of these phenomena a more instrumental approach to understanding the current processes of Islamisation in the Muslim world, and this volume is meant as a contribution to such a project.

The following focuses upon specific cases of interactions between gender and Islam. Historically the politicizing of gender relations has often emerged as a salient trait of modernisation and as argued by Valentine Moghadam 'the politics of gender may be especially strong in patriarchal societies undergoing development and social change' (1992:4).

Modernisation is frequently associated with liberation from oppressive traditions. Thus, to equate Islamisation with modernisation appears to be a contradiction in terms. However, as argued above we perceive the current Islamism as genuinely oriented toward creating a modern future Muslim society. In focusing upon women's perspectives and motivations for committing themselves to religious practice, a prominent vantagepoint emerge where Islamisation processes materialise as a kind of mediator between 'tradition' and 'modernity'(See Eva Evers Rosander chapter 6 this volume).

From the publication of *Women in the Muslim World* in 1978 the study of women in Muslim communities has shown a tremendous increase. In the preface to the second edition of their book Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie noted the strengthening of Islamic Law in various fields relating to women and the family together with the spread of veiling among urban groups where the female dress code had been more westernized. However, they underline that 'this trend is less

directed at women per se than it is at political and cultural goals - such as breaking with a West perceived as imperialist...' (ibid. viii) .

Since then several publications, academic and popular, have put emphasis on this trend as a central part of policy of various Islamist groups. Debates about women's position have become an integral part of modern Islamic discourse, where challenges are made to go beyond the traditional statements on reiterating the prophet's liberating effects on pre-Islamic gender structures. As noted by Ziba Mir-Hossein (1996) the rhetoric and arguments used in this discourse acquires a distinctly different quality if it appears in an oppositional discourse of national politics or is appropriated by the ruling powers. The cases presented in this volume draws on ethnographic fieldwork in local communities in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Senegal and Turkey, thus potentially covering both situations of active opposition as well as the ruling powers that be.

While women's positions in the secular and sacred realms is debated by all Islamist groups as a prominent religious and political issue, there is as yet no authoritative Islamist agenda concerning women, or set by women themselves. Publications by various Islamist groups reveal a persistent gap between public discourse and social practice. While discourse remains largely frozen in a conventional mould, practice is beginning to take many divergent and sometimes unorthodox directions where also women emerge as active interlocutors that influence the shaping of religious movements. As argued by Lisa Taraki (1996,159-178) this is 'one area of the Islamist agenda which is most open to debate and most amenable to experimentation.'. In the pages that follow we try to capture and analyze parts of this debate.

In the West both scholarly and popular debates seem to presume that there are only one authoritative Islamist agenda that proscribes further development. Most analyses of women's relation to or involvement in Islamic movements, continue to build upon models depicting their position either as instances of false consciousness (on the part of the women) and/or examples of victimization and curtailment of their individual liberty by religious fanatics. While not denying the relevance of these positions, we contend that both women's resistance to and 'complicity' with these movements must be specified in context rather than assumed in advance.

Two edited volumes were recently published that focus specifically on gender and women's relationship to religious fundamentalist movements. In the introduction to one of them, *Refusing Holy Orders* (Eds. G.Sagal and Nira Yuval-Davis 1992) suppression of women is given as a prominent defining characteristic of fundamentalism, while in *Fundamentalism and Gender* (Ed. John Hawley 1994) the possibility of women's involvement is acknowledged and it is argued that 'differences of perspective are apt to ensue when women, not men, speak the language of fundamentalism' and 'fundamentalism perspectives on gender cast a uniquely revealing light on the nature of fundamentalist as a whole'(Ibid:25 and 33). However, as noted above, we do not enter a general debate on religious fundamentalism, but concentrate upon concept Islamism as a primarily descriptive concept to denote phenomena often referred to in Western media as

fundamentalism, radical Islam etc. The concept is used as a working definition for groups that share a family likeness in the way they make religion relevant to spheres of social organisation. A shared aspect among the cases presented in this volume is that they depict women who invest in religion as an essential part of their identity and self-presentation. The cases illustrate Henrietta Moore's reasoning that 'individuals take up a variety of subject positions through several often mutually contradictory subject positions ' (Moore 1994:55).

The different contributions reflect upon and suggest perspectives where women are dislocated from positions as passive signpost for moral boundaries that demarcate the territory between believer and infidel and materialise as active agents defining what Islam is and ought to be. In this process Islam, as the other monotheistic world religions, is opened up to reinterpretation and change. During this process a range of practical and moral problems are presented to the believers, and women are active contributors suggesting manners of resolutions both through direct intellectual discourse and not the least through current revitalisation and reinterpretation of religious practices.

Several of the comparative studies on religious 'fundamentalism' argue that fundamentalist groups in their policy and rhetoric show a persistent concern with the various *others,* implying a continuous re-definition of self by drawing boundaries between believer and non-believer, faithful and apostate. In the symbolic marking of these boundaries women appear as a metonym for overarching themes of religious purity and control. This preoccupation with various representations of otherness confront the external other, often identified with the secular West, but also internal others such as the 'opposite sex' (Hawley 1994:27). This argument about the theoretical importance of otherness builds and elaborate upon the 'universal inevitability' that the mother is recognized as the first other against whom child strives to get independent identity, particularly so boys. However, we should note Harris' charge that the argument on female otherness and its position within fundamentalist discourse, serves to deflect attention from an un-examined ethnocentrism - our own feminist perceptions about equivalency between women and men.(Ibid:29).

Making religious beliefs and practices relevant in new ways that expand its application to new social spheres entails a distanciation which make people, men and women, reflect upon the objective consensus on the world, and start to put questions to essentials that have gone 'without saying because it comes without saying' (Bourdieu 1977:167). This process of putting into words what may have earlier been taken for granted, engenders debates, conflicts and controversies where assumed consensuses are liable to break down. In this process, religious beliefs and practices are lifted out, politicised, and made emblematic for marking identities and interests of larger collectivities. As noted by Deniz Kandioty, areas linked to family and women are often entrusted as boundary markers for the culturally uncontaminated, figuratively threatened by invading forces in times of rapid social change.

The understanding of Islamist discourse has been firmly wedded to theorizing about the resurgence of religious fervour as a reaction to deprivation and loss in

8

the face of thwarted modernisation, the loss of authority and self assurance of local traditions by forces of globalisation. While not disputing such a macro structural explanation of the fact that Islamisation policies gain ground in several third world societies, we chose to start from the perspective where we want to understand not only political, but also religious aspects of the adherence to these groups - which leads us to seek analytical concepts that serves to reveal religion as 'something that actually takes place in human life'.

Modernity

Gellner's formulation that 'the secularisation thesis does not apply to Islam' (Ahmed and Hastings xiii;1994) undermine essentialist bifurcating models where tradition opposes modernity and rationality religious faith and indicate our common point of departure in a fruitful way.

We use the concept of modernity to refer both to indicators of technological and economical change and to indicate a frame of mind where the authority of the past has been displaced . As noted by several scholars (cf.Rippin 1993:6) the definitional stance between modern and traditional is in far more of a flux than the dichotomy modern:traditional suggests. Hence the retention and reinterpretation of tradition does not imply a wholesale rejection of the modern, but the continuation of certain aspects of life in a mode authorized by the past'. Secularisation is usually presented as a defining trait of modernisation. We have no ambition to go beyond the formulation of middle range generalisations.

High and Low Tradition

The dialectic between an authoritative scripturalist tradition and what is often called mystical Islam, has a long intellectual and religious history. The historical relation between these two types of religious traditions varies, from situations of contradiction where the *ulama* attacks the *tariqa* for being too close to folk Islam and too far from *sharia,* to situations where the two exist in peaceful accord, the individual adherent combining mystical devotion and traditional worship, often described as parallel Islam. Two contributions, by Eva Evers Rosander and Catharina Raudvere, (see chapter 5 and chapter 6 this volume) describe and analyse women's involvement in *sufi* sects. The formal leadership in both these segments of religious practice rests with male authorities. Often the traditions and folk beliefs associated with parallel Islam is labelled un-islamic and heretic and associated with the unlettered and would in most cases include women. Female piety, their knowledge and interpretation of religion are expressed in local Islam in ways that often raises issues concerning authenticity and orthodoxy. The specific relation - dynamic or otherwise - between folk beliefs and scripturalist high tradition, is one important indicator of the differentiation and changes inherent in modernisation.

Recruitment to Islamist groups draw heavily on the educated young, both male and female, and several groups offer a wide choice of activities that get response also among those without a job. This important characteristic of the Islamist movement blur the high:low dichotomy and expand its appeal beyond the range of the political and religiously active masses. While the various groups in the movement are popular in the sense of engaging in a discourse involving 'lay' Muslims they are certainly not 'low' in the sense of promoting beliefs and practices deemed superstitious/heretic or erroneous by the scripturalists.

Modernisation processes influence the relation between scripturalist 'high' tradition and largely non-scriptural local practices, so called 'low tradition'. While women seldom have formal positions in the 'high' tradition linked to central institutions like the mosque, we do find them active in the retention of a religious orientation implied in a multitude of local settings.

Outline of the volume

The contributions are for the most part descriptive, but we seek to raise comparative issues of a general kind. We do this by analysing religious practices in the lives of women in various Muslim communities from Senegal to Iran. We seek actor oriented perspectives for participation in religious activities and groups from local perspectives and try to analyze the women and the group they are a part of as cases encompassed and regulated by religious creed and practice on a general level. A central focus for Islamisation processes is the active interference of the state in matters of society, even though the mode and scale of this intervention is vastly different between say Iran and Senegal. The different contributions also indicate some of the differences state interference makes to gender issues when Islamisation is linked to legitimation of the politics of the rulers, as opposed to an ideology for the mobilisation of the opposition. (see the chapters of Zahra Kamalkhani and Willy Jansen this volume.)

Identity

The identity markers of sex and religion are challenging as they share in a quality of ascribed status and deeply ingrained emotional patterns of behaviour. The freeing of individual identity from predetermination by class, race, biological sex, and caste have been major issues in the historical movements of liberation in this century, not least the struggle for women's emancipation. Religious movements seem on the surface to go against this process of individuation by defending traditional value hierarchies against the attacks that leaves the individual as the only ultimate value that can be agreed upon (Dumont 1986). Non modern models of the relation between the individual and her social surroundings are seen as representing vestiges of suppression of individual human rights, or embodies cultural systems that subordinates the individual to the collective. In an Islamic cultural context the case of women as embodiment of their family's social prestige

10

and symbols of male honour is often depicted as a 'hard programmed' cultural value. Several of the cases presented analyze how women renegotiate their location and gain larger mobility and easier access to the public arena. Crossing the demarkation line between private and public by drawing on resources from the formal religious discourse is a strategy used by many of the women described in the chapters of this volume.

The debates and controversies surrounding the use of the veil in its various forms constitute one intake to analyzing the reasoning among women around individuation and agency. As several of the cases in this volume show, women may don the veil as a strategic measure and pragmatic choice to enhance their mobility and freedom of action in the non-domestic arena. On the other hand, the imposing of the so-called Islamic dress code by political powerholders may create an active opposition by women. During the rule of Zia Ul-Haq in Pakistan the slogan *Chader aur Char Diwari* lit. 'The veil and the four walls' was used to project the political programme for Islamisation of society. Ironic comments from women pointed to the fact that the morals and demeanour of women as well as men were dependent on self-control manifest in *Ankhoon ki Purdah*, not in the outward signs of a conservative *burqa*.

Women's position and role in the debates on and analysis of Islamist movements warrants a closer attention not least for the analytical insights it may provide into general comparative perspectives on the development of movements of this type. Exploring perspectives and positions on the margin may also reveals hot-beds for the continuing appeal of the message.

As argued by several of the contributors to this volume, women are carving a space for their own identity and thereby push against the fixed traditional patriarchal forms of domination in several spheres. However, women are still marginal figures in the authoritative writings of the leadership of the various movements, their activities and positions are explicated on the basis of interpretations of sacred texts by male scholars, and the discourses of Islamist groups are clearly male dominated and textual interpretation and rendition are a highly contested and coveted expertise. Nevertheless, Anne Sofie Roald's comparison between Christian and Muslim theological debates concerning creation, women and the sacred (chapter 1 this volume) analyze an emerging intellectual debate where female perspectives are prominent.

Dominant and subdominant discourses

The intellectual leadership in Islamist movements is in the hands of educated elite males - but if we look for aspects of moral leadership we may begin to hear female voices also. At first glance women appear as mute embodiments of Islamic principles emerging through a male dominated authoritative discourse. However, the shaping of every-day religious practice and beliefs are dependent upon the active participation of women. Analysis of confrontations over the correct interpretation and implementation of religious principles related to gender relations

opens up for readings at different levels. One such level is the textual exegesis and discussion of central emblems and practices of the religion, other levels relates to the non-verbalised code and conduct of the believers in every day life. We present both types of discourses in this volume and while we suggest a gendered labour division of the type where men still dominate the hegemonic discourse, while women are mainly visible in the rituals of piety associated with the subdominant discourses referred to above. We find these qualifications important to make as they also impinges upon explanations for the recruitment to Islamic movements where frustrations and disappointments with promises of modernity might be different for women from men.

Personal motivation and reflections upon own life before and after activating commitment to Islamic religious and ritual practices emerge as central in several of the contributions. The divide between before and after may appear more or less dramatic in the individual cases, from the woman who speaks of her life in terms of before and after her big *Jahiliya*,(Soraya Duval chapter 2 this volume) to the type of gradual change implied in reorganising lifestyle and shifting commitments between work outside the home and domestic duties implied in the cases presented by Willy Jansen (chapter 3).

The religious tenets for the two genders' performance of the five pillars of the religion - *Kalma*, *Namaz*, fasting, *Zakat* and *Haj* are as we know different. The reasons given why women should postpone their ritual performance of prayer etc. refer to female bodily functions like menstruation, childbirth or, for both genders, sexual intercourse.

Ritual impurity are thus inherent and inscribed in the female body - a body that both serves as a metonym and a tangible site for the honour of family groups related to the women. Women's self awareness and changing routines for bodily practices such as taking a bath, impinges upon and invites further reflections on changing borders between private and public in utilising modern amenities such as the shower (see M. Buitelaar chapter 5 this volume).

A defining element of Christian as well as of Islamic religious practice is the notion of hierarchy, that is not easily translated into a secular one where ranking implies a superior/inferior ranking system. Here, the ordering connotes a proximity/ distance relation to God and one ethnographic theme that runs through the different chapters in this volume is the position and quality of female piety in relation to seeking religious merit and divine blessing on behalf of self and others. Accepting that the female subject has to submit to other and more circumscribed domains from where to seek divine blessing, we should note their contribution to and submission to acts which are classified as mandatory (*farz*), their initiative to go beyond and undertake acts of devotion that bring religious merit (*sawab*), and those that may acquire God's blessing (*barakat*) and avoid the category of acts that are deemed (*gunnah*) 'sinful' or classified as absolutely forbidden (*haram*). The various chapters in this volume present detailed analyses of ways women participate in and contribute to an Islamic construction of reality, demonstrate how religious experience always is gendered, and lift out women's activities in 'high' as well as 'low' Islam.

12

References

Ahmed, A. and Hastings Donnan *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity* London: Routledge.

Beck, L. and Keddie (1978) *Women in the Muslim World*, Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burgat, F. (1993), *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*, Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas at Austin.

Dekmejian, R.H. (1985), *Islam in Revolution,* New York: Syracuse University Press.

Gellner, E. (1992), *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London: Routledge.

Giddens, A. (1990), *The Consequences of Modernity,* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hawley, J. S. Ed. (1994), *Fundamentalism and Gender* New York: Oxford University Press

Kandioty, D. Ed. (1991) *Women, Islam & the State*, London Macmillian

Moghadam,V. (1992) "Patriarchy and the Politics of Gender in Modernising Societies:Iran,Pakistan and Afghanistan in: *International Sociology*, Vol.7,no.1.

Moore, H. (1995) *A taste for Difference: essays in anthropology and gender.* Cambridge, MA, Oxford, Polity Press.

Pipes, D. (1983), *In the Path of God*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers

Rippin, A (1993) *Muslims. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices; The Contemporary Period* London: Routledge.

Sagal, G. and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992) *Refusing Holy Orders* London: Virago Press.

Taraki, L. 'Jordanian islamists and the Agenda for Women: Between Discourse and Practice', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.32, No.1., January 1996.

Yamani,M. (1996) *Feminism and Islam. Legal and Literary Perspectives.* London: Ithaca Press.

Tjomsland, M. interview with Rashid Ghannouchi in London, March 1996.

Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources: Muslim Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition of Feminist Thought

Anne Sofie Roald

Introduction

In the last decade there has been an increasing concern with women's rights in Islam. Not only have Muslim feminists highlighted the status of women in Muslim societies but Islamists,[1] male and female, have also joined the debate, stressing the liberating potential Islam has for women. During my fieldwork which in Malaysia in 1991-92, I came across a group called 'Sisters in Islam'. It consisted mainly of highly educated Malay women, but also included some Western converts to Islam. They had an Islamic profile and they distributed pamphlets with titles such as *Are Muslim men allowed to beat their wives ?* In Karachi, Pakistan, in February 1992 I met a group of women at Karachi University with a very similar perspective. During my visit to Jordan in April 1992, I found that in regard to women issues, female perspectives were mainly a matter for the more secularised forces of society. However, on revisiting Jordan in the summer of 1995 I was thrown directly into the debate on the Muslim woman's position in society. It was interesting that this debate was conducted in one of the headquarters of the Islamists in Jordan, in the Islamic Studies and Research Association (ISRA), also known as the Jordanian centre for the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). In a period of three years Islamists' attitudes towards gender and gender relations had changed character. Muslim women's reinterpretation of Islamic sources is thus a matter of interest as it is not only an intellectual discussion within a feminist sphere but has entered the contemporary Islamist debate, as well.

This study will focus on the feminist intellectual discussion: what has been done in this respect and which subjects have been considered significant. Can feminist reinterpretation of Islamic sources be set in the context of Islamic theology, i.e. is it possible that this trend might influence established Islamic

---

[1] I use the term 'Islamism' and avoid using the term Islamic fundamentalism as fundamentalism denotes a Christian direction with a literary reading of the Bible. Islamism does not imply a literary reading of the Islamic sources, rather it promotes the idea of regarding Islam as "a complete system", a body of ideas, values, beliefs and practices encompassing all spheres of life (cf. Haddad 1987; Roald) 1994.

theology? It is also of importance to examine the Muslim feminist tradition's relevance to a Christian feminist theology: what similarities exist and where do they divert?

The centennial anniversary of the publication of *The Woman's Bible* was observed in 1995. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was the main editor of this work and together with the black feminist Anna Julia Cooper's book, *A Voice from the South* (1892), it marked a turning point in Christian feminist theology. Early Arab feminists, such as the Lebanese Nazīra Zayn ad-Dīn, incorporated feminist ideas into an Islamic frame of reference. In 1928 she published a book called *Removing the Veil and Veiling*, which aroused the anger of Islamic scholars. It will be interesting to see whether Muslims will only repeat the development of the Christian tradition or whether Islam is so inherently different from Christianity that a comparison between the two religions is impossible. This question can also be posed regarding matters such as whether Islam will be just as secularized as is Christianity, in the sense of a separation between church and state (*din wa dunya*). I suggest that the development of feminist ideas within an Islamic framework necessarily will end up in asking such a question, but in the inauguration of a feminist reinterpretation of Islamic sources other matters are emphasized.

Reformation or Reconstruction

An important issue in the Christian and Judaic feminist tradition is whether the aim is *reformation* or *reconstruction*. On the one hand, feminists can regard the holy text as limited by its historical context and thus fragment it, classifying the fragments according to what is regarded as either universal and essential or culturally relative. On the other hand, feminists can regard the holy text as androcentric and manmade in the interest of men. The last position was that of Cady Stanton and the implication of this point of view is far-reaching.

Another issue which is closely related to the question of reform or reconstruction is whether interpretation of the holy text should be within a patriarchal framework or outside it. A reform would imply a degree of acceptance of existing ideas whereas a reconstruction would imply a refutation of the same ideas. Within the tradition of feminist theological hermeneutics, Carolyn Osiek distinguishes between five hermeneutic approaches to the biblical text by contemporary feminists: *loyalist, revisionist, sublimationist, rejectionist,* and *liberationist*.

According to Osiek, the *loyalists* accept the bible as divine revelation and the word of God but at the same time they claim the divine intention of man and woman living together in happiness and respect.[2] Turid Karlsen Seim, a Norwegian researcher on The new testament, speaks of *fundamentalist woman's exegesis,*[3] thus indicating a literal reading of the text, and this particular approach

---

[2]   Osiek 1985:99.

[3]   Discussion with Turid Karlsen Seim February 16. 1995.

15

fits into Osiek's *loyalist* category. The *revisionists*, according to Osiek, believe that the patriarchal framework for the Judaeo-Christian tradition is historically and culturally but not theologically determined.[4] The revisionist approach to reading the bible involves a search for positive role models for women and an interpretation of the text from a feminist point of view. The *sublimationists* tend to read the bible allegorically, presupposing equality of maleness and femaleness or even a preference for femininity.[5] She characterizes Cady Stanton among the *rejectionists*, stating that as regards the bible as well as Christianity and Judaism, Cady Stanton considered them so permeated by patriarchal ideas that they had to be rejected. The fifth category, *liberationist* feminism, yearns for a transformation of the social order. The focus is on women's liberation in this world through a female struggle against all oppression.[6] These five categories can be incorporated into the model of *reformation* and *reconstruction* where *loyalists*, *revisionists* and *sublimationists* can be classified as *reformers* whereas *rejectionists* and *liberationists* are *reconstructers*.

In the new Muslim feminist tradition several of these categories defined by Osiek are visible. Nawwal al-Saadawi can be characterized as *rejectionist*, whereas from the writings of Amina Wadud-Muhsin and Riffat Hassan we can classify them both as *loyalist* and *revisionist*. Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmad are the closest to the *liberationist* scholarship. However, these categories are not totally distinguishable. Islam plays such a fundamental role in Muslim societies that for a social reformer to exclude Islam necessarily means failure. Many feminists, who previously struggled against female oppression in Western feminist terms have therefor now adapted to a more favourable attitude towards Islam. This is true for feminists such as Fatima Mernissi. It seems that in her study *Beyond the Veil* (1977) she considered that changes in the conditions of women could be done without the frames of Islam, whereas in her book *Women and Islam* (1987) she has shifted attitude and believes that such a change has to be done from within Islam through a reinterpretation of Islamic sources. However, Mernissi does not give her point of view on the authority of the Koran in either of these two works. The work of Leila Ahmad also points in the same direction, as she is vague in her attitude towards Islam. In her 1992 book *Gender and Women in Islam*, she expresses the view that Islam's coming brought with it a deterioration in the status of women in some places, whereas in other places it had a liberating effect. She does not, however, explicitly reject Islam,but rather the common interpretations of the Islamic sources. It seems that by focusing on Islam, the principles of female liberation have acquired a certain validity in Muslim society, as Islamically-minded women would sympathize with parts of their arguments.

As for Wadud-Muhsin and Hassan, both tend to analyze the Koran within a framework accepted by many Islamic scholars. Although many of their arguments

---

[4] Osiek 1985:100.

[5] Osiek 1985:102.

[6] Osiek 1985:103.

16

would be contested by these scholars, their works are part of an internal Islamic debate.

The Question of Authority

The question of authority is a vital one in both the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic debates. There are two levels of authority concerning the holy scriptures, the authority of *the text* and the authority of *the interpretation of the text*. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has noted that the feminist biblical discourses have been caught up in an apologetic debate which seeks to show that the Bible, or at least parts of it, is *either* liberating and therefore has authority for women...*or* that it is totally patriarchal and must be rejected.[7] This issue, which she labels 'the apologetic debate' is very much part of the new Muslim feminist debate although less explicit than in the Judaeo-Christian debate which has gone on for more than a hundred years. As shown above, in most of her work Mernissi does not explicitly reject the Koran as the word of God, but neither does she explicitly accept it.

The concept of the holy text as the word of God has today different implications in Christianity and Islam. A common notion among researchers of Islam has been that the Koran is to Islam what Jesus is to Christianity. The development of the historical-critical method in the biblical debate has revealed that the question of whether the Bible contains words coming directly from God or whether it is only human narration about holy persons and happenings is not as fundamental as the question of whether the Koran is the word of God or not. It is possible to regard Jesus as 'the son of God' in spite of a degrading of the holy text, whereas Islam's theology is contingent on the belief that Koran is the word of God (*kalām allāh*) which exists in heaven 'in a preserved tablet' (*fī lawhin mahfuz* [K. 85:22]).

The question of authority related to the interpretation of the Islamic sources is emphasised in the debate. In Christianity, Schüssler Fiorenza has noted that the project of *The Woman's Bible* started 'with the realization that throughout the centuries the Bible has been invoked both as a weapon against and as a defence for subjugated women in their struggles for access to citizenship, public speaking, theological education, or ordained ministry.'[8] This ambiguity of the holy text rests on differences of interpretation. As every interpreter has his or her own distinctive biography, this will influence the reading of the text. The interpreter's biography involves a person's specific character-traits, upbringing and experiences as well as class status and gender.[9]

---

[7] Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:5.

[8] Schüssler Fiorenza 1994.

[9] Hastrup 1992; Hastrup studies fieldwork methodology and the role of the ethnographer. The ethnographer also performs an act of interpretation and her study can therefore be transferred to the sphere of interpretation of Holy Texts.

17

There is, however, another issue involved in Schüssler Fiorenza's expression. As theological deductions from the sacred texts have been a matter for elite males and thus favourable for men at the expense of female interests, religion has been the means for women to endure oppression. Schüssler Fiorenza has asserted that women's biblical heritage is 'at one and the same time a source for women's religious power and for women's suffering.'[10]

An important question to pose is, *who has the authority to interpret the Islamic sources?* The traditional understanding in Islam has been that the interpreters of Islamic theology should be males only. Due partly to the gender-segregation in Muslim society with a traditional division of labour, where men are in charge of the civil life whereas women are supposed to keep to the domestic sphere, and partly to the low educational standard Muslim women used to have, the ideas of female Koranic interpreters have been refuted. There are records of female intellectuals and teachers in Muslim history,[11] but it is difficult to judge whether these women just transmitted male knowledge or created knowledge of their own.

Female Perspectives

A probable hypothesis would be that when female perspectives come into focus the interpretations of the Islamic sources change. However, this is not always true. The first known woman to comment on the Koran was A'isha 'Abd ar-Rahmān (Bint ash-Shātī') born in 1913 in Egypt. She was a professor of Arabic literature in Cairo and a professor of Koranic studies in Morocco. According to Andrew Rippin, a researcher on Islam, A'isha 'Abd ar-Rahmān saw the Koranic aim to be spiritual and religious guidance, and not to give historical facts.[12] Although she emphasises the importance of regarding the Koran according to time and place of revelation, her approach is not feminist. It is interesting to note that Schüssler Fiorenza stresses that a woman who reads the Bible does not necessarily read it from a female perspective. She claims that 'to the contrary, women's writing and speaking often function to mediate and reinforce kyriarchal behaviour.'[13] She further argues:

One must also consider that women, even more than men, have internalized cultural-religious feminine values and that they consequently tend to reproduce uncritically the patriarchal politics of submission and otherness in their speaking and writing.[14]

As for 'A'isha 'Abd ar-Rahmān, Schüssler Fiorenza's observation seems plausible. Rippin has labelled her as 'neo-traditionalist' and states that her

---

[10] Schüssler Fiorenza 1994.

[11] Berkey 1991:143-157.

[12] Rippin 1993:94.

[13] Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:14.

[14] Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:15.

18

approach to the Koran is 'conservative'[15] Although she is critical, her criticism is more directed to the rigidity of earlier interpretations in general, rather than to traditional assumptions of femininity or womanhood.

It took a little more than thirty years from the publication of *The Women's Bible* in 1895, to the first feminist interpretation of the Islamic sources. However, from this first step up to the nineteen seventies and eighties, Muslim feminists tended to regard the feminist case in purely Western terms and Islam was not brought into the debate. With the advent of the Islamic resurgence from the end of the sixties onwards the Islamic issue came to the forefront even in the feminist debate. In a short time many Muslim women have published books and articles dealing with a reinterpretation of the Islamic sources. It is also interesting to note that in the nineties two Islamic scholars, Muhammad al-Ghazzālī and Abd al-Halīm Abū Shaqqa, have taken up the subject of Muslim women. They take their starting point in the present situation of oppression in the Muslim world, claiming this to be a result of ignorance of 'the true Islam'. Their method is a reinterpretation of the *ahādīth* (Prophet Muhammad's sayings, actions and decisions (sing. *hadīth*) in two stages. Firstly, they take care to verify the authenticity of the *hadīth*, as they claim that many *ahādīth* previously regarded as authentic (*sahīh*) in reality are either good (*hasan*), weak (*daī'f*), or forged.[16] The second step is to interpret the *ahādīth* in the light of the Koran. If the common interpretation is not compatible with the Koranic text, the *hadīth* if authentic, has to be reinterpreted in order to agree with the Koranic view. Abū Shaqqa in particular, claims that many widespread *ahādīth* talking about women in a negative way are forged. These scholars' efforts seem to be independent of the recent Muslim feminism. Rather, their works can be regarded as part of a discourse with 'the West'. The massive attack by Western scholars on the position of women in Islam has opened up the issue for reinterpretations by well-known Islam scholars. The issue of gender relations is sensitive in a Muslim context and it requires courage as well as a good reputation to open up such an issue. The reactions of other Islamic scholars have been harsh, but less harsh than the reaction towards the Muslim feminists.[17]

In 1982 *Women's Studies International Forum Magazine* dedicated an issue to the subject *Women and Islam.* Apart from contributions by researchers on Islam, Muslim feminists were also invited to come forward. Aziza al-Hibri wrote *A story of Islamic herstory: Or how did we ever get into this mess?*, which was influenced by the contemporary biblical feminist debate. Nawwal al-Saadawi and Fatima

---

[15] Rippin 1993:94.

[16] In science of *hadīth* these three categories sahīh, hasan and *da'īf* relate to the authenticity of the chain of narrators (*isnād*) and to the text (*matn*) of the *hadīth*.

[17] Amina Wadud-Muhsin went to South-Africa and during her stay there she gave a lecture in one of the mosques. The reaction of the *ulamā* was hard. In one of the periodicals, *The Majlis: Voice of Islam*, she was attacked and one of the statements was: 'Anyone who claims to be a Muslim and then supports any satanic scheme of reinterpreting the Koran or the *shar'īa* leaves the fold of Islam. He is a *murtadd* (apostate).*The Majlis: Voice of Islam* 1994:5 (vol. 11 No .7).

Mernissi also contributed articles to the magazine, but their contributions are marked by a secular approach and they are more concerned with Muslim practice than with overarching theological questions. In 1985 Riffat Hassan brings up 'theological inquiries' into the Islamic sources. She emphasizes the equality of the sexes which can be read out of the story of creation in the Koran and she compares this view with the *hadīth* literature where one can find a totally opposite view on gender relations. Fatima Mernissi published *Women and Islam* in 1987, drawing attention to the *ahādīth* on women in order to investigate their authenticity. She chooses to concentrate on the reliability of the narrators of these *ahādīth*. She argues that Abū Hurayra, a famous narrator of *ahādīth* was a misogynist, thus colouring the *ahādīth* he transmitted from the Prophet with his own views.[18]

She also attacks the use of *hijāb* (the head-scarf), claiming that there is no Koranic evidence that the wearing of a veil is an Islamic obligation.[19] Refusal of the Islamic use of a veil is common among Muslim feminists. Leila Ahmad, in her book *Women and Gender in Islam*, argues that veiling for women was a requisition for the wives of the Prophet only.[20] It is interesting to note that the idea of veiling as a symbol of oppression has been rejected by Samīra Fayyād, a leading Islamist who has been active in the struggle for female influences in the Islamist movement in Jordan. She wrote in an article:

There are many roots of this insignificance in women's position. The first of which is the divergence of women's liberation movements away from the essence of the problem. Those involved in the movement should have joined the mainstream of a general liberation movement working for the liberation of man and woman in times when both were suffering. Upholding her banner of women's liberation emphasized her peculiarities as female and overlooked her integral nature as a rational and sensible human being. Rather she should have concerned herself with the national problems side by side along with men bearing full responsibility, ignoring marginal matters such as changing dress-styles and other trivialities.[21]

The issue of the veil exposes fully the tension in the Muslim feminist debate between the *reformers* and the *reconstructers*. As the debate is in its inaugural phase the differences are to an extent smoothed, whereas the tension will probably be more and more visible in the progress of the debate.

The most common issues in the contemporary feminist reinterpretation of Islamic sources are:

(1) Reevaluation of Islamic sources
(2) Criticism of the use of Islamic sources

---

[18] Mernissi 1991:62-81.
[19] Mernissi 1991:85-101.
[20] Ahmad 1992:55.
[21] Fayyād 1992:3.

(3) Criticism of interpretations of Islamic sources
(4) Equality of men and women in the Koran

I will exemplify these issues by referring to two Muslim feminists, Amina Wadud-Muhsin and Riffat Hassan. As stated earlier, both these two can be classified in the *loyalist* and *revisionist* approach as identified by Carolyn Osiek. I have chosen to deal only with the *reform* feminists as there is a probability that common Muslims and Islamists will take their views into account and thereby open a discussion with them. This has to a certain extent been done as Amina Wadud-Muhsin received the King Faysal Prize for her academic work *Qur'an and Women* in 1994. The reputation of Fatima Mernissi and Nawwal al-Saadawi, in Muslim society is that of 'Western feminists' and very few Muslims outside the ranks of Muslim feminists would find their writings relevant.

Re-evaluation of Islamic Sources

Amina Wadud-Muhsin has in her work been concerned with the study of the Koran only. She has not taken *ahādīth* into consideration. Hassan, on the other hand, devotes a great part of her study to *ahādīth* although she states that she will concentrate on the Koran as it is '*the* primary source of *normative* Islam'.[22] She explains *ahādīth* to be 'the lens through which the words of the Koran have been seen and interpreted.'[23] She takes her starting point in a discussion of 'the Islamic tradition' which she considers to be the Islamic texts (Koran and *ahādīth*) as well as the whole body of regulations and laws built on these texts. She refers both to the refutations of *ahādīth* by what she calls 'moderate' Muslims, such as the Pakistani intellectual, Ghulam Ahmad Parwez, and the Indian scholar Moulvi Cheragh Ali and to the quotations of famous orientalist scholars, such as Alfred Guillaume and H. A. R. Gibb where they invalidate the *hadīth* literature. By this she manages to raise doubts to the validity of *ahādīth*. Although she believes that one has to be sceptical towards the *hadīth* literature, she sees that to a certain extent the *ahādīth* are necessary and she agrees with the saying of Fazlur Rahman: 'If the *hadīth* literature as a whole is cast away, the basis for the historicity of the Koran is removed with one stroke.'[24]

Criticism of the Use of Islamic Sources

Both Amina Wadud-Muhsin's and Riffat Hassan's approach to the study of the Koran is in the first place hermeneutical. Wadud-Muhsin explains her hermeneutical model as being concerned with firstly, the context in which the

---

[22] Hassan 1990:93.

[23] Hasan 1990:94.

[24] Hassan 1990:94.

Koranic passages were written, secondly, the grammatical composition of these passages and thirdly, the world-view of the Koran.[25] As for the latter she states that most of the former Koran commentators would have an atomistic methodology, as they would interpret one verse at the time without regarding the text as one part of a whole.[26]

Hassan claims that 'religion is being used as an instrument of oppression rather than as a means of liberation.'[27] She further argues that 'the negative attitudes pertaining to women which prevail in Muslim societies, in general, are rooted in theology.'[28] She believes that Muslims in general 'consider it a self-evident truth that women are not equal to me'[29] a belief which in Hassan's view lies in three theological assumptions:

1.   that God's primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created from man's rib, hence is derivative and ontologically secondary;
2.   that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily described as 'Man's Fall' or Man's expulsion from the garden of Eden, hence 'all daughters of Eve' are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion and contempt; and
3.   that woman was created not only *from* man, but also *for* man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not of fundamental importance.[30]

Hassan gives three main explanations of these theological assumptions. Firstly, the patriarchal environment in Muslim society has made Islamic scholars during history interpret Islamic sources in terms of male hegemony. Secondly, many ahādīth with negative attitudes towards women are in circulation in Muslim society although their authenticity has been questioned and their popularity, even among Islamic scholars, points to the view of women as subordinated to men, as being deeply embedded in Muslim society.[31] In presenting her arguments, Hassan also indicates that many *ahādīth* about women are forged as she believes that there are incompatibilities between passages in the Koran and many of these *ahādīth*. She even criticizes the position of the *hadīth* collections by al-Bukhārī and Muslim in Islamic jurisprudence, believing that Muslims accept the two collections as being on a like footing with the Koran.

To Islamic scholars, Islamists and even common Muslims criticism of the *ahādīth* might be regarded as criticism against Islam itself. This makes the project of a feminist reading of the Islamic sources a very delicate matter as there exist utterances related to the Prophet which convey negative views of women such as,

---

[25] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:3.
[26] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:2.
[27] Hassan 1990:96.
[28] Hassan 1990:96.
[29] Hassan 1990:100.
[30] Hassan 1990:100-101.
[31] Hassan 1990:103.

for instance that the majority of the inhabitants of Hell are women.[32] Some feminists would refute these sayings, claiming them as forgeries, whereas others, such as Amina Wadud-Muhsin have chosen to leave out the matter of *ahādīth* and concentrate solely on the Koranic text and its previous interpreters. However, this method is problematic as the *ahādīth* are regarded as the explanation of the Koran and thus have strong authority in Islamic Theology. Others again, such as the Islamist Samīra Fayyād, together with male Islamists, such as Muhammad al-Ghazzālī and 'Abd al-Halīm Abū Shaqqa, would explain these *ahādīth* hermeneutically, emphasising the specific situation of every *hadīth*. Thus this specific *hadīth* mentioned above would be explained as an admonition made by the Prophet to women in general and should be understood as a general reminder (*tadkira*).[33]

The differences in interpretations and understandings of *ahādīth* point at the multivalence of the text. Not only will *ahādīth* be interpreted differently in different contexts, but it also depends on the interpreter how the text will be perceived. The subject of the researcher is also decisive for the understanding of the text. A researcher on gender relations in Islam will search for statements about women only and might fail to notice that there are expressions about men and human beings in the Islamic sources which convey negative views of both men as a category and mankind as a whole. However, these statements have not been understood as generalizations by Muslims themselves, but rather as admonitions and reminders that human beings should follow the path of God. On the other hand, as even Islamist scholars have noticed, many *ahādīth* have actually been interpreted in terms of male preference or have been presented as authentic (*sahīh*) although they are either only good (*hasan*) or weak (*da'īf*).[34]

Criticism of Interpretations of the Islamic Sources

The traditional interpretation of Islamic sources is high on the agenda of the modern feminist debate. Wadud-Muhsin discusses the objectivity of the interpreters of the Koran, claiming that not one of them can be wholly objective as their 'subjective choices' would colour the result of their research. Her main criticism is not of the commentators, but rather of the common conception that there is no distinction between text and interpretation; thus there is a tendency to elevate interpretations to a holy level. She characterizes three approaches to the interpretations of women in the Koran: 'traditional', 'reactive', and 'holistic'.[35] She explains the 'traditional' exegetical works (*tafāsīr* sing. *tafsīr*) as those which interpret the entire Koran with certain objectives in mind, such as grammar, esoterism, rhetoric, history, or legislation. She claims this approach to be atomistic

---

[32] Muslim 1971:1431 (vol. IV).

[33] Abū Shaqqa 1990:273.

[34] c.f. Abū Shaqqa 1990; al-Ghazzālī 1989; al-Ghazzālī 1991; al-Qardāwī 1990.

[35] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:2.

with no underlying hermeneutical principles in order to interpret each part of the Koran in the light of the Koran as a whole. In addition, all of these interpretations, both from classical and modern times, have been written by men, and Wadud-Muhsin thus believes that women's experiences have been either excluded from the text or 'interpreted through male vision, perspective, desire, or needs of women.'[36]

The 'reactive' approach to the interpretation of the Koran has, according to Wadud-Muhsin, mainly been concerned with criticism of the Koran and Islam. Modern scholars have justified this criticism because of the poor status of women in Muslim society. However, Wadud-Muhsin states that these scholars, likewise, do not distinguish between the text and the interpreter.[37]

The aim of Wadud-Muhsin's study is to demonstrate the best tool for the liberation of Muslim women, namely to turn to the Koran, 'the primary source of Islamic ideology and theology'.[38] This represents the third approach, the 'holistic' interpretation of the Koran. According to her, this method includes modern social, moral, economic, and political aspects and even the issue of women.[39] She refers to Fazlur Rahman's principle of interpreting Koranic passages, saying:

> He [Fazlur Rahman] suggests that all Koranic passages, revealed as they were in a specific time in history and within certain general and particular circumstances, were given expression relative to those circumstances. However, the message is not limited to that time or those circumstances historically. A reader must understand the implications of the Koranic expressions during the time in which they were expressed in order to determine their proper meaning. That meaning gives the intention of the rulings or principles in the particular verse.[40]

The project of reinterpretation or of turning back to the primary sources without regarding previous scholarship as infallible, started with the intellectual *salafiyya* movement in the nineteenth century. Although women's issues were not particularly emphasized, some reforms in the view of women were visible. One example is Muhammad Abduh's interpretation of the verse of polygamy in the Koran. Turning away from the common understanding that marrying more than one woman is well accepted, if not obligatory, he suggested that the last part of the verse should take effect, namely: 'But if you fear that you might not be able to treat them [the wives] with equal fairness, then [marry only] one....This will make it more likely that you will not deviate from the right course (K. 4:3).'

In Western society the feminist thought achieved a breakthrough in the sixties and seventies and brought with it a kind of relativism, as perspectives changed. It became obvious that 'the objectivity' of the researcher was only an illusion.

---

[36] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:2.
[37] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:2.
[38] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:3.
[39] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:3.
[40] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:4.

Various sciences opened up for new interpretations as it became obvious that previous research results have been dominated by male perspectives. The reinterpretation of the Islamic sources by women is a new project and the next decades will show us whether this project has any future. Let us now turn to the reinterpretation in order to examine the elements involved.

Equality of Men and Women in the Koran

Initially in the Muslim feminist theological debate the idea of equality between the sexes in the Koran is emphasized. This study is mainly concerned with the ideological level and will thus take up the question how gender relations have been perceived anthropologically and cosmologically. I will concentrate on two main issues: How is the creation of human being in the Koran interpreted by the feminists? And how do they perceive the role of women on earth?

Creation of Human Being

Wadud-Muhsin asks the questions:
'Do the Koranic accounts of the process of the creation of humankind distinguish woman from man in such a way as to confine her potential to a single biologically determined role? Does it imply created inferiority?'

She argues that although the Koran distinguishes between man and woman she finds no differences in value between them. It is, however, important to notice that Islamic scholars in various times have accentuated the very same point, but they have tended to link this equality to the relationship between man and the Creator only. Thus, equality of man and woman for both *madhhabists*[41] and the more modern Islamists signifies religious equality, i.e. equality in Islamic obligations, such as praying and fasting; whereas sociologically man and woman are depicted to have different roles. This division of roles related to gender contrasts with the Western paradigm where social equality rests in the first place on economic equality: whether women have either private economical means or property or take active part in the production of society.

Wadud-Muhsin has attacked the common understanding of gender relations in Islam. She bases her arguments concerning equality between men and women in the Koran on human being's incomprehension of the supernatural.[42] To make these matters understandable for mankind, according to her, they need to be rendered in human language,. Thus, in the Koran we can find references to other worldly happenings which we as human beings must interpret allegorically.[43]

[41] c.f. Roald 1994:17. I define madhhabist as those Muslims who adhere to the *madhhabs* (the four law-schools).

[42] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:15-16.

[43] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:16.

Wadud-Muhsin turns to the story of creation in the Koran. She believes that attitudes towards women in Muslim society are built on the interpretation of this story. She takes her starting point in the Koranic verse:

And from (*min*) His signs (*ayāt*) is that He created you (humankind) from (*min*) a single soul (*nafs*), and created from (*min*) it its mate (*zawj*), and from (*min*) these two He spread countless men and women (K. 4:1)

From this verse she extracts key terms, such as *min, nafs* and *zawj*. As for *min* she claims that it can be used for the preposition *from* in the meaning of *extracting things from other things*. It can also, according to Wadud-Muhsin, be used to imply 'of the same nature as' and she states that in the Koranic verse above the meaning changes according to which translation of the preposition one chooses. She refers to al-Zamakhsharī (d.1144 CE.), a famous commentator on the Koran, saying that he interprets this verse as meaning that 'humankind was created *in/of the same type as* a single *nafs,* and that the *zawj* of that *nafs* was taken *from* that *nafs.*' She says that he has found backing for his argumentations in biblical versions.[44] It is important to be aware of that most of the commentators of the Koran from the first centuries of Islamic history onwards incorporated many Jewish interpretations or Talmudic accounts of various biblical stories (*isrā'īliyāt*) which have their counterparts in the Koran. In the modern Islamist debate, however, many of these stories have been weeded from these *tafāsīr*. One example is the famous *tafsīr* by Imād ad-Dīn Ibn Kathīr (d.1372 CE.), which in the nineteen-seventies was examined by Shaykh Muhammad 'Alī as-Sābūnī. The result was presented as *mukhtasar tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Shortened Commentary by Ibn Kathīr) and it is regarded as containing only authentic material.

With this in mind we have to turn back to Wadud-Muhsin's discussion on the preposition *min* and how the Koranic verse changes its meaning according to which understanding of *min* is used. She states implicitly that al-Zamakhsharī arrived at his conclusion wrongly as he depended on biblical material. However, I would argue that al-Zamakhsharī's conclusion is not based on these biblical materials which are classified as *isrā'īliyāt*; rather it is a result of the understanding of a *hadīth* found in the *hadīth* collections of both al-Bukhārī and Muslim related by Abū Hurayra and thus accepted as authentic by orthodox Islam:

Treat women kindly. The woman has been created from a rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is in the upper region. If you try to make it straight, you will break it, and if you leave it as it is, it will remain curved. So treat women kindly.[45]

Wadud-Muhsin actually mentions this *hadīth* in a footnote, saying that according to Riffat Hassan the *hadīth,* although authentic, belongs to the category of *hadīth*

[44] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:18.
[45] Al-Bukhārī 1984:346 (vol.4); Muslim 1971:752 (vol.2).

26

āhād which means that this *hadīth* was reported by one person only.[46] Hassan has rejected, not only the authority of chain of narrators (*isnād*), as nobody other than Abū Hurayra has related this *hadīth*, but also the text (*matn*) of the hadīth.[47] Both Hassan and Wadud-Muhsin reject the *hadīth* as normative.

Hassan also emphasizes that 'God's original creation was undifferentiated humanity and not either man and women'.[48] She proves this by pointing to the meaning of 'Adam''in Hebrew which is 'of the soil'. She further says that the Hebrew term 'Adam' refers to 'the human' (species) rather than to a male human being and in the Koran the term is used, in twenty-one cases out of twenty-five, to refer to humanity. She also states that the Koran uses both feminine and masculine terms and imagery to describe the creation of humanity from a single source.[49] In addition, the creation of Eve (Arabic: *Hawwā'*) from Adam's rib is never mentioned in the Koran, and even in the *hadīth* referred to above, Adam is not named. Hassan interprets the function of this *hadīth* to be 'further 'dehumanization' for women since the female species could - in the *ahādīth* in question - have been created from a disembodied rib which may not even have been human.'[50] It is interesting to note that a minority of Islamic scholars, such as Muhammad al-Ghazzālī, are of the view that *hadīth āhād* should not be normative either in legislation or in doctrine. There is thus a controversy between orthodox Islamic scholars which substantiates Wadud-Muhsin's criticism of al-Zamakhsharī's analysis of the Koranic verse above.

The next key term to be dealt with is *nafs*. Wadud-Muhsin observes that grammatically, *nafs* is feminine, whereas it conceptually is neither masculine nor feminine as according to her, the Koran never states that the creation of humankind started with the *nafs* of Adam. Thus she considers that the Koran does not express the creation of humankind in terms of gender.[51]

Both Hassan and Wadud-Muhsin have dealt with the key term *zawj*. Wadud-Muhsin stresses that *zawj* is masculine, grammatically speaking, whereas conceptually it is neither masculine nor feminine. Hassan goes further, saying that whereas the Koranic usage of *azwāj* refers to the married couple; man and woman, another form for 'couple', namely *zawjayn* (dual form of *zawj*), describes the process of ongoing creation, referring to the Koranic verses:

1.'And it is He who has created the two kinds (*zawjayn*), male and female out of a drop of sperm as it is poured forth' (K.53:45-46).

2. 'Does human being, then, think, that he is left without a purpose? Was he not once a drop of sperm emitted? Then he did become a leech whereupon He created

---

[46] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:18-20.

[47] Hassan 1990:102.

[48] Hassan 1990:102

[49] Hassan 1990:102.

[50] Hassan 1990:127 (footnote).

[51] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:20.

and formed [him] in due proportion. And he made out of him two sexes (*zawjayn*); male and female' (K. 75:36-39).

She concludes from this that man and woman are 'two sexually-differentiated human beings - created by God from a unitary source (*nafsin wāhidatin*).' Man and woman are therefore, according to Hassan, 'related to each other ontologically, not merely sociologically.' [52]

As for the common notion of women as temptresses prevailing in the Judaeo-Christian world as well as among Muslims, Wadud-Muhsin rejects the notion that this should be part of Islamic theology. She states that the Koran uses the dual form, with one exception, to tell how Satan tempted Adam and his mate (*zawj*) and how both disobeyed God.[53] The one exception shows how *Adam* was tempted by Satan, and then the two of them (Adam and his mate) ate of the forbidden tree.[54]

According to Wadud-Muhsin and Hassan the creation of humankind is thus gender-neutral and nothing in the Koran or in reliable *ahādīth* points at to male gender as morally or intellectually superior to the female. Male and female as types are thus equally before God, with the same religious obligations and the same religious rights. This view does not differ from the view of most contemporary Islamists, who would explain men and women to have equal value but with different social tasks and obligations. There has been a modification of the view of women. This can be viewed in terms of Islamism as a reaction against both modernism and modernity, where modernism depicts modern thought whereas modernity characterizes the technification of life.[55] These modifications can be observed in the works of the Islamic scholars Abū Shaqqa and al-Ghazzālī. However, among *madhhabists*, particularly in the circles of *ahl al-hadīth* (those who adhere to the *ahādī th*), and among the *salafīs*[56], males are considered as possessing a higher value than females due to statements in various *ahādīth*, among them the *hadīth* referred to above.

It is of interest to turn to Christian feminist theologians and their interpretation of the act of creation in the Bible. Phyllis A. Bird is one of those who have dealt with this subject. She compares the two versions in Genesis, the Priestly account and the Yahwistic account. She states that the two stories contain 'no statement of dominance or subordination in the relationship of the sexes.[57] She further argues that in the accounts:

---

[52] Hassan 1990:98.

[53] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:25.

[54] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:25.

[55] c.f. Lawrence.

[56] The Salafi Movement is a movement which has strengthened its position in the Arab world from the seventies onwards. It is marked by a strict adherence to the *ahādīth* and a total rejection of the *madhhabi* system. For further information see Roald 1994.

[57] Bird 1991:20.

28

> The social metaphors to which the key verbs point are male, derived from male experience and models, the dominant social models of patriarchal society. For P, as for J, the representative and determining image of the species was certainly male .... Though the Priestly writer speaks of the species, he thinks of the male, just as the author of Psalm 8. But maleness is not an essential or defining characteristic.[58]

It is important to note that although there is a similarity between Bird and Wadud-Muhsin in the perspective of gender-neutrality in creation of man in the two religions, Bird's historical-critical method leads her to draw conclusions, such as that the bible was written by humans, an assumption which is not possible in an Islamic exegesis.

Roles of women

When it comes to divisions of roles in Islam, Muslim feminists would part also from the common view of moderate Islamists. Wadud-Muhsin chooses to discuss the role of women from two perspectives:

1. There is no inherent value placed on man or woman. In fact, there is no arbitrary, preordained and eternal system of hierarchy.
2. The Koran does not strictly delineate the roles of woman and the roles of man to such an extent as to propose only a single possibility for each gender (that is, women must fulfil this role, and *only* this one, while men must fulfil that role and only men *can* fulfil it).[59]

She claims that the Koran 'acknowledges that we operate in social systems with certain functional distinctions.'[60] Further, Wadud-Muhsin sees that these 'functional distinctions included in the Koran have been used to support the idea of inherent superiority of men over women.'[61] She asks two main questions: 'Are there certain exceptions and exclusions for males or females? Does the Koran value certain functions above others?'[62]

Wadud-Muhsin observes that in the Koran the woman's primary *distinction* is on the basis of her childbearing ability. Thus, Muslims have regarded this ability to be her primary function. However, she rejects this Muslim notion, claiming that there is 'no term in the Koran which indicates that childbearing is 'primary' to a woman' and that 'no indication is given that mothering is her exclusive role.'[63] She also rejects the notion that men are special because only men have been

---

[58] Bird 1991:18.
[59] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:63.
[60] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:64.
[61] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:64.
[62] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:64.
[63] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:64.

29

selected to be prophets. She points out that although there are no Koranic examples of female prophecies, women such as Maryam and the mother of Moses received revelations (*wāhy*).[64] She argues that all those chosen as prophets were exceptional human beings and the prophecy is thus not a specific characterisation for males.[65]

Wadud-Muhsin has analysed two Koranic terms, *daraja* (step, degree of level) and *faddala* (to prefer) which 'have been used to indicate value in the functional distinctions between individuals and groups on earth.'[66] She argues that the Koran 'does not divide the labour and establish a monolithic order for every social system which completely disregards the natural variations in society. On the contrary, it acknowledges the need for variations when it states that the human race is divided into nations and tribes that you might know one another" (K. 49:13).'[67] She thus concludes that the Koran allows and encourages each individual social context to determine its functional distinctions between members, but applies a single system of equitable recompense which can be adopted in every social context.[68]

She analyses the concept *daraja* in this perspective, saying that *daraja* is most often linked to doing 'good' deeds.[69] God also gives *daraja* to individuals; either on the basis of knowledge (K:58:11) or on basis of social or economic distinctions (K. 43:32). Wadud-Muhsin quotes the Koranic statement: 'Unto men a fortune from that which they have earned, and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned' (K.4:32). From this discussion Wadud-Muhsin turns to the verse in the Koran where men are said to be a *daraja* above women. She says that although this verse is specifically about divorce, Muslims have taken it to mean that a *daraja* exists between all men and women, in every context.[70] She believes that the advantage men have over women is that of 'being individually able to pronounce divorce against their wives without arbitration or assistance,' whereas women can obtain a divorce only after the intervention of an authority.[71] This interpretation, although plausible, seems to be limited. Wadud-Muhsin does not question the common notion that a Muslim man can divorce his wife without any intervention. The Koran does not give a specific procedure for how to divorce and a more profound investigation of this matter should be of interest in a study of the Koran and women.

Wadud-Muhsin turns to the term *faddala* (*faddala* means 'to prefer' and *fadl* means 'preference'). She refers to three 'preferences' in the Koran: Firstly,

---

[64] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:65.
[65] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:65.
[66] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:65.
[67] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:67.
[68] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:67.
[69] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:66.
[70] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:68.
[71] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:68.

30

humankind is preferred to the rest of creation (K.17:70); secondly, occasionally, one group of people have been preferred to another (K. 2:47, K. 2:122, K. 7:40); and thirdly, some of the prophets are preferred to others (K 2:253, K.6:86, K.17:55). She believes that preference is not absolute, as although some prophets are preferred to others, there is *no distinction* between them. She concludes that in Koranic usage, 'preference is relative'.[72] She notes that both *daraja* and *fadl* are given as tests, but unlike *daraja, faddala* cannot be earned. *Fadl* is given by God to whom he wants.[73] As for *fadl* the central verse in the Koran is:

> Men are [*qawwāmūn 'alā*] women, [*bi*-on the basis] of what Allah has [*faddala* -preferred] some of them over others, and [*bi*-on the basis] of what they spend of their property (for the support of women) (K. 4:34)[74]

In her analysis, Wadud-Muhsin sees this in a material context, saying that there is only one place in the Koran where men have preference over women and that is in inheritance where men inherit twice as much as women. She links this preference to the obligation to spend of their property, which follows directly in the verse. She concludes that 'there is a reciprocity between privileges and responsibilities.'[75] She says that 'men have responsibility of paying out of their wealth for the support of women, and they are consequently granted a double share of inheritance.'[76] Wadud-Muhsin rejects the notion that men were created by God superior to women (in strength and reason), a common interpretation of this verse. She believes that *faddala* is not conditional as the text does not say that *they* (men) are preferred to them (women). Rather the text states that *some* of them are over *some*.[77] She asserts:

> The use of *ba'd* (some) relates to what obviously has been observed in the human context. All men do not excel over all women in all manners. Some men excel over some women in some manners. Likewise, some women excel over some men in some manners. So, whatever Allah has preferred, it is still not absolute.[78]

Wadud-Muhsin further discusses earlier interpretations of the expression *qawwāmūn 'alā*. She notes that Pickthall, an English convert to Islam who translated the Koran in the early twentieth century, perceives this expression as 'in charge of', and al-Zamakhsharī translates it as 'men are in charge of the affairs of women.' As for Mawdūdī, the Pakistani Islamist, he perceives the Koranic passage as that 'men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the

---

[72] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:69.
[73] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:69.
[74] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:70.
[75] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:70-71.
[76] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:71.
[77] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:71.
[78] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:71.

one superior to the other.'[79] Lastly, she turns to Sayyid Qutb who regards this verse in a family context. Wadud-Muhsin also observes that Qutb believes that as men provide for their families, this gives the males the privilege to be *qawwāmūn 'alā* the females. However, he states that 'the man and the woman are both from Allah's creation and Allah ... never intends to oppress anyone from His creation.'[80]

Building upon his argumentations, Wadud-Muhsin concludes that within the family each member has certain responsibilities. Ideologically speaking, according to Wadud-Muhsin, women's primary responsibility is childbearing (human existence depends upon it), whereas men's responsibility is the support of the family (the continuation of the human race depends upon it). However, in contrast to this ideal Wadud-Muhsin says:

> This ideal scenario establishes an equitable and mutually dependent relationship. However, it does not allow for many of today's realities. What happens in societies experiencing a population overload, such as China and India? What happens in capitalistic societies like America, where a single income is no longer sufficient to maintain a reasonably comfortable lifestyle? .... What happens to the balance of responsibility when the man cannot provide materially, as was often the case during slavery and post slavery US?[81]

Her view is that the Koran must eternally be reviewed and reinterpreted according to social conditions with stress on mutual responsibility between males and females. She further calls for a broadening of the concept *qiwāma* (guardianship) from the material sphere to include spiritual, moral, intellectual, and psychological dimensions as well.[82]

The Koranic passage 4:34 has its counterpart in the Bible. Genesis 3:16 states 'he shall rule over her' where rule is a translation of the verb *mashāl. Mashāl* can also be translated as manage or control and the resemblance to the Koranic term *qawwāmūn 'alā* is apparent. Bird states:

> For the relationship of companionship, established in the creation and exhibited in the mutual drive of the sexes towards each other ... is broken by the added word of judgement: 'he shall rule over her' (3:16). The companion of chapter 2 has become a master. The historical subordination of woman to man is inaugurated - and identified as the paradigm expression of sin and alienation in creation.[83]

---

[79] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:71.

[80] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:73. Qouted from Qutb 1980:650 (vol.II).

[81] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:73.

[82] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:74.

[83] Bird 1991:21.

Reflections

Wadud-Muhsin and Hassan discuss matters which are also treated by the moderate Islamic scholars, such as the position of the *hadīth* literature in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the role of women in Islam. Hassan's discussion of the authority of *ahādīth* reveals her ambivalent attitude. Wadud-Muhsin does not explicitly reject the authority of *ahādīth,* but as she does not use them in her analysis of the Koran this implies that she does not fully support them either. The feminists take a stand *against* much of the *ahādīth* dealing with women in a negative way, whereas the Islamic scholars would not reject these *ahādīth* but would interpret them in a more favourable way. The discrepancy in view opens up a conflict as a re-evaluation of *ahādīth* is not generally accepted in Islamic theology. The reform feminists are obviously aware of this fact and that explains the vagueness in their formulations. They will thereby have an advantage, as their work might get a Muslim audience, whereas the reconstructor, such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmad and Nawwal al-Saadawi, who are more outspoken in their criticism, would be read favourably by certain groups only.

In the view of women at the ideological level, Muslim reform feminism does not divert too much from moderate Islamism. For instance, the widespread Islamic movement the Muslim Brotherhood's ideas on women are that men and women are equal in regard to divine worship, whereas they have different roles in society. However, in practice it seems that in the world-view of the Brothers 'social inequality' has eclipsed 'spiritual equality'. This is also true for the actually existing Muslim societies as women have a rather low social status estimated in economic terms. It is, however, important to pose the question whether a sociological model constructed in Western society is applicable to Muslim society as the economic and socio-political conditions are different. As mentioned above, Islamism and particularly moderate Islamism is very much a modern phenomenon with modern perspectives. The same is true of Muslim countries which are mainly modern, secular states. It is therefore possible that many attitudes and values common in Western society can be found in Muslim society, too. Thus, the evaluation of women in Muslim society might be in accordance with global standards even by Muslims themselves. The view of Muslim women is therefore ambivalent: at the same time traditional and modern. Wadud-Muhsin's and Hassan's studies are in this context important as they try to adjust a modern view of women in Islam to a modern reality.

There is a distinction between Wadud-Muhsin and Hassan and the Christian feminist theologians which I have referred to above. The historical-critical methods used by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Phyllis A. Bird are part of an established scientific tradition within Christian theology. They do turn to the study of gender relations, which is a controversial issue within the same tradition, but they do not part too much from the established research tradition. In Islam the established research tradition is totally different. With the breakdown of the authority of the traditional *madhhab* (law-school system), the research concentrates mainly on textual analysis and thus works methodologically in search of evidences to

establish laws and regulations suitable for modern society. Wadud-Muhsin and Hassan keep to the same research method.

Schüssler Fiorenza is basically text-oriented, i.e. she goes behind the text, reconstructing a historical action which she states does not have to be verified as historical fact. She is thus a *reconstructor* in the Christian feminist tradition. Likewise, Bird is a reconstructor as she deconstructs the text and regards the text in its historical context. She believes that:

> the revelatory content of the word [the biblical text] and its contemporary meaning are apprehended only through this conversation [which has both ancient (canonical and post-canonical) and contemporary partners] and may not be identified with any particular text or locution nor with the author's imputed intention.'[84]

Wadud-Muhsin and Hassan on the other hand, are interpretation-oriented, i.e. they make semantic analysis in order to change common interpretations of the text and are thus *reformers* in the Islamic tradition. However, in spite of the obvious differences in approach of Schüssler Fiorenza and Wadud-Muhsin and Hassan, I would suggest that their positions within their respective traditions are similar. There is a discrepancy between Christianity and Islam, particularly in the literal reading of the text, which appears most clearly in a comparison between the story of creation in the Bible and in the Koran as in the Koran Eve is neither depicted as a temptress nor created by the rib of Adam. Wadud-Muhsin explains:

> In other religions, feminists have had to insert woman into the discourse [of the interpretations of the holy texts] in order to attain legitimacy. The Muslim woman has only to read the text - unconstrained by exclusive and restrictive interpretations - to gain an undeniable liberation.[85]

In this context it is also important to note that feminist Christian reconstructor perceive the Bible as written by human beings and in particular by men, whereas Muslim feminist reformers most probably would perceive the Koran as the 'Word of God'. There do exist feminist Christian fundamentalists who would also regard the bible as the 'Word of God', but I consider this group to be less similar to Islamic feminists both in aims and in methodology than are the feminist Christian reconstructor.

Among the *loyalist* categorisation by Osiek, there are the feminists belonging to the evangelical tradition of an exegesis of the Bible. This approach can be comparable to that of the Muslim feminists discussed above. Likewise with the starting point of Wadud-Muhsin, this tradition requires a view of the revealed text as an absolute authority. Is it thus possible to place Wadud-Muhsin and Hassan

---

[84] Bird 1991:24.

[85] Wadud-Muhsin 1992:vi.

34

in a fundamentalist [86]tradition as expressed by Karlsen Seim? The answer would be *yes* if fundamentalism stands for a 'return to the pure sources of Islam' and it would be *no* if fundamentalism stands for a political interpretation of Islam.[87] It is, though, important to be aware of the distinction between fundamentalism in a Christian sense of the word and in its Islamic context. The former indicates a literal interpretation of the text whereas the latter is explained above as meaning 'a return to the pure sources', thus going beyond the development of Islamic theology. However, Islamic fundamentalism does not necessarily imply a literal reading of the Koran and the ahādīth. The similarity between feminist theology in Christianity and Islam can appear amazing as there is a common notion of the two religious spheres as being far apart. However, by turning on the one hand to the background of a joint Middle Eastern heritage as a starting point for a common framework of social and spiritual ideas, and on the other hand to the common problematic of the contemporary Global Village, differences seem rather minor, depending on developments in different times and places rather than as fundamental and absolute.

References

Abū Shaqqa, °Abd al-Halīm. 1990. *tahrīr al-mara__ a fī asr ar-risāla*, (Dār al-qalam li n-nashr wat-tawzī) Kuwait.

Ahmad, Leila. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam*, (Yale University Press) New Haven

Berkey, Jonathan P. 1991. *Women in Middle Eastern History*, (Keddie, Nickie and Baron, Beth eds.) (Yale University Press) New Haven.

Bird, Phyllis A. 1991. "Sexual Differentiation and Divine Image in the Genesis Creation Texts" in *Image of God and Gender Models*, (Solum Forlag) Oslo.

al-Bukhārī. 1984. *Sahīh al-Bukhārī* (Kitab Bhavan) New Dehli.

Fayyād, Samīra. 1992. "Future opportunities and prospects for women in Islam." (From a paper submitted to a seminar on Muslim-Christian dialogue at the Vatican in Rome, June).

al-Ghazzālī, Muhammad. 1989. *as-sunna an-nabawiyya bayna ahl al-fiqh wa ahl al-_adth*, (Dār ash-Shurūq) Cairo. 1991. *kayfa nata'āmal ma' al-qurān*, (International Institute for Islamic Thought) Herndon.

Haddad, Yvonne Y. 1987. 'Islamic awakening in Egypt' in *Arab Studies Quarterly* vol.9, No 3. Summer.

Hastrup, Kirsten 1992. 'Writing ethnography: state of art' in Okely, J. and Callaway, H. (ed.), *Anthropology and Autobiography*, (Routledge) London.

---

[86] Arabic Muslims use the Arabic term *usūl*. However, this term has, in contrast to the English 'fundamentalist', a positive connotation and denotes a person who searches back to the proper legal evidences (*al-ahkām ash-shara'iyya*) of the sources of Islam.

[87] For further discussion on the fundamentalistic terminology, c.f. Haddad 1987:234-259; Roald 1994.

Hassan, Riffat. 1990. 'An Islamic Perspective' in *Women, Religion and Sexuality* (Becher, Jeanne ed.) (World Council of Churches Publication) Geneva.

Ibn Kathī Imād ad-Dīn. 1973. *mukhtasar tafsīr ibn Kathīr* (vol. I-III), (Dār al-Qurān al-Karīm) Beirut. 4

Lawrence, Bruce. 1989. *The Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (I.B. Taurus & Co.) London.

The Majlis:Voice of Islam 1994 (vol.11 No 7)

Mernissi, Fatima. 1991. *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Basil Blackwell) Oxford.

Muslim. 1971. *Sahīh Muslim* (Dar al Arabia) Beirut.

Osiek, Caroly. 1985. "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives" in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship,* (ed. A.Y Collins) (Chico, CA:Scholar Press) California.

al-Qardāwī Yūsuf. 1990. *kaifa nata'āmal ma' as-sunna an-nabawiyya,* (International Institute for Islamic Thought) Herdnon.

Roald, Anne Sofie. 1994. *Tarbiya: Education and Politics in Islamic Movements in Jordan and Malaysia,* (Almqvist &Wiksell International) Lund Studies in History of Religions, Lund.

Rippin, Andrew. 1990. *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices. vol.I* (Routledge) London.

Rosaldo, Renato. 1993. *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Routledge) London.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth (ed.) 1994. *Searching the Scriptures,* (SCM) London.

Wadud-Muhsin, Amina. 1992. *Qur'an and Woman* (Penerbit Fajar Bakti SDN. BHD.) Kuala Lumpur.

New Veils and New Voices: Islamist Women's Groups in Egypt

Soroya Duval

'I was educated in a French school, didn't know proper Arabic, and tried Western life-style. This was the time of my big *Jahiliya*[1] Fear of God and his mercy took me back to Islam. In Islam I found security, happiness, and truth; the happiness I didn't even feel in the streets of the admired Champs Elysée in Paris'. (Leader of an Islamist Salafi group).[2]

One might think that in this era of the 'information revolution', Arab Muslim women would also be presented in the light of objective and accessible knowledge. However, they tend to be one of the least understood social groups, subjected to speculation, generalization and stereotyping. Analysts inside as well as outside the region tend to see Muslim women as the most severely oppressed group in present-day society.

The predominance of Islam as well as a common language unifying this huge Arab region are the main reasons for perceiving Arab and Muslim women as a single entity. It is almost impossible to convey a full understanding of gender constructs in the Middle East without coming into collision with the general assumptions and stereotypes held about Islam and Muslim women. A considerable body of new research emerged in the 1980s about women's history in this region, yet with a few exceptions (Tucker1993; Ahmed 1992; Badran 1987; Rosander 1991; Keddie&Baron 1991; Hussain 1984; Mohsen 1985), the bulk of the studies rest on social development theories, modernization theories, as well as orientalist or 'neo orientalist' accounts for analysing Muslim women in the Middle East (cf. Minces 1982, Nawal 1982, Saadawi 1980, Afshar 1985).

These studies neglect the specificity of Arab history, social organization and culture. Written from the perspective of modernization theories such studies emphasize some aspects of the lives of Arab women at the expense of others. Arab women are either doomed to an unchanging oppression, or recent changes are attributed to the transfer of Western ideas. Oppression is seen as beginning to lift in the 19th century with the coming of Western thought. Western ideas about

---

[1] Jahiliya, lit. ignorance, but in Islamic history referred to as the period of worshipping idols in pre-islamic Arabia.

[2] Interview conducted by author in 1993.

37

Islam and Muslim women date as far back as the 17th century, and have their origin in the tales of travellers or crusaders. Descriptions of these societies as well their customs was mostly distorted and misconstrued (Said 1978, Akbar 1992). The issue of women and Islam, however, emerged as central in Western illustrations when Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries. In the words of Elise Boulding (1976), 'understanding of women in history suffers from a triple bias, a male bias, a class bias, and a Western bias'. The great variations in the cultures and societies of the Arab Middle East make any single statement about Muslim women false and misleading. Arab countries differ in their history of colonialism, industrialization, urbanization, modernization, and secularization. Variations are also to be found in ethnic, tribal, religious, and cultural groups. Likewise, the lives of women in different classes cannot be considered similar.

Females in the upper and middle classes enjoy more options in life than women of the lower classes. Nevertheless, Islam is viewed as the main origin of the prevalence of sexual inequality in the Middle East. It is, however, a well established fact that sexual inequality existed in all parts of the world long before the beginnings of Islam and is therefore not a feature exclusive to Muslim societies. Analysis of patriarchal notions and institutions must, therefore, shift to the fabric of socio-cultural conditions of women's and men's lives in their different settings. Western social scientists' approach reflect a high degree of ethnocentrism in assuming that liberation for Arab women has to follow the same unilinear line as the American and European women's movements. It is expected that these goals are universal and that they should more or less be followed in the same order. However, some Arab women, mostly elite women, who have internalized the goals of liberation in another context, don't have the kind of self-image that represents the goal of women's liberation in the West (Ahmed 1992, Joseph 1993). Those women want to retain the communal extended family aspects of traditional society, while eliminating its worst abuses, such as easy divorce for men and forced marriages.

The largest number of western feminist researchers hold the belief that once a society is dominated in certain spheres by men, women will become a suppressed and passive group. Nothing can be further from the truth as the Muslim women you will meet will indicate in the passages to follow. Another important arena of social function as well as a sphere of power are women's beliefs and religious activities, which should not be underestimated. With the general "Islamic trend" sweeping over the Middle East since the 1970s, they become an interesting realm in analyzing gender struggles in the region. These activities as I shall present later, involve groups of women between and among whom essential links are created, links which can crosscut and override kin and status group barriers. Female solidarity in the form of "sub-societies", in social systems where there is a preference for the segregation of the sexes, can be a powerful social force and can become an effective way of enhancing position vis a vis the male members of the community.

Female solidarity can also lessen male domination by lowering the degree of dependence that women have on men. I am not suggesting that women's positions should be ranked above that of men's, but attempt to demonstrate that both male and female spheres should be considered carefully, and that such an approach might bring us a long way beyond the stereotype of the meek and subordinate Muslim female. To demonstrate this more effectively, I have taken Egypt as a case study, not only because it is an Arab and predominantly Muslim country, but also because Egypt has played a major role in the struggles around the meanings of gender since the 19th century. In many ways developments in Egypt heralded and mirrored developments in the Arab world . Secondly, there seems to be a striking similarity between the discourse of the British colonial powers in Egypt during the 19th century, and the prevalent feminist discourses today, in which especially the veil epitomizes islamic inferiority and the oppression of women (Ahmed 1992). The colonial power (the British occupation started in 1882) wanted to transform Egyptian society to the values of the 'civilized' European world, and Islam, women, and veiling played a central role to it. In Western eyes only by giving up these 'peculiar' and 'intrinsic' practices, would Muslim societies move forward on the path of civilization. The veil, for the colonizers but also in the vision of contemporary Western political culture, is the most visible marker of the 'otherness' and 'inferiority' of Islamic societies. It therefore was and is an open target for attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.

Egypt becomes also particularly interesting because of the various Islamist movements that have mushroomed in the1970s, which has also paralleled the formation of Islamist women's groups. The Islamist women's groups in Egypt are part of a broader social movement that appeared in the 1970s in Egypt. I make use of Herbert Blumer's typology of social movements which considers a situation whereby a general social movement can give birth to specific social movements. It is possible to consider Islamist women groups as one such 'specific social movement' which is advocating an 'Islamic alternative' from a female perspective.

The arguments and empirical data in this article are based on an exploration of the experience of Islamist women in four different groups (Salafi, Tabligh, Zahra', Muslim Brothers), and the part they play in perpetuating or altering relations of power . Participant observation through presence in the meetings or study circles took place, and informal interviews were conducted with leaders as well as members of the groups. I examine what seems to be an ambiguous political struggle by Islamist women, who are on the one hand fighting actively against their inequality but are on the other accepting or supporting their own subordination. Although the location of women's struggles is looked at in a specific cultural setting and the location of women's struggles is emphasized within the specific interactions of gender, class, and global inequities, I think that the results can be suggestive for understanding women's contradictory role in relations of power elsewhere as well. Further,in an attempt to analyze the Egyptian situation as it developed during the 1970s, the Islamic phenomenon is considered as a processual, multidimensional one within the historical framework of factors that encouraged the rise of Islamism and Islamist women's groups.

The Islamic Trend 'El Tayyar El Islami '

Islamist groups grew stronger and more widespread in the 1970s and have continued to gain ground since . This tendency has made itself visible through the Islamic dress '*El ziyy el Islami*'[3] for both men and women. A variety of factors have contributed to the mushrooming of these groups and the new type of Islamic outlook . Much of the literature dealing with the subject has dated their emergence to the aftermath of the 1967 defeat of Egypt by Israel though a political-military analysis would reached far beyond the performance of the regime itself and revealed a deeper and more complex structural crisis that was hidden underneath. To make sense of the defeat people sought a variety of explanations. Common explanations were that the military had grown elitist, corrupt and bureaucratic, or that Egypt was underdeveloped technologically. There was one explanation, however, circulating in the society that was most significant: the Egyptians had abandoned God and, therefore, God had abandoned them .

A further dimension explaining the phenomenon in question was the exploitation or use of religion from above by the government, for purposes of legitimization, as was widely suggested. With regard to the state of unrest prevailing throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s both explanations are valid. Yet in my opinion, the determining factors that permeated the Egyptian society favouring an 'Islamic Alternative as the way out', and even explicitly used by the Islamists as a slogan 'Islam is the solution' (*Al Islam Huwa El Hall*) are to be found in the period following the 1973 war and all through the decade in question. The Islamic trend was further strengthened spiritually by Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Although these were countries the Middle East, yet they have had tremendous influence, whether formally through a group or informally through personal attitude of central political personalities. The Islamic Revolution in Iran 1979, and the Islamisation of Pakistan under General Zia ul-Haq after seizing power in 1977, as well as the Afghan mujjahidin's struggle against communism, were considered ideals to be followed. The Islamisation of Sudan under El-Bashir after seizing power in July 1991 as well as the war in Bosnia are more recent examples.

It is important to note that in our understanding of Islam two equally important levels of analysis present themselves. As Ali H.Dessouki points out (1982:14), Islamic experiences are not historically monolithic. Universality in Islamic history is reflected and characterized by a prevalent unity of belief whereby the holy message is operative at the macro level. At the micro level, however, Islam is specific. Islamic experiences appear therefore in the shape of activities conditioned by specific cultural and social constraints.

The Egyptian case is no exception, in that both characteristics of Islam, universalism and specificity, are reflected throughout its history. The 'Islamic Alternative' should not, therefore be seen as a novel phenomenon per se although its articulator and the forms of articulation have changed. The articulation of an

---

[3]   The term signify that they fulfil Islamic requirements of modesty.

40

'Islamic Alternative' seems to have be favoured by factors of national economic and social unrest throughout the centuries, yet the manifestations of these forces have differed from one period to the next and so have the responses. The challenges faced by Muhammed Abduh, Rashid Reda, and their disciples at the turn of the century were different from those that brought about the Hassan al-Bannas movement in the late twenties and thirties. Likewise, the manifestations of the political, social and economic crisis faced by Egypt in the 1970s were also different and, consequently, so was the articulation of the' Islamic Alternative' .

Nationalism / Islamism

The loss of faith in Nasser and his entire secularist ideology came as another consequence of the defeat. His 'socialist' programmes were now judged to have been failures. After Nasser's death in 1969 the government retreated from socialist politics throughout the 1970s under Sadat's rule, and Sadat permitted the Muslim Brothers 'El Ikhwan El Muslimun' to resume their activities, which Nasser had banned. Sadat was now more and more brought under attack from Nasserists and communists. One strong base of opposition to his adversaries were the 'Ikhwan' whom Sadat wanted to exploit to the utmost. Publications by the Muslim Brothers soon reached a wide audience, and particularly after the Camp David treaty with Israel,turned not only to criticizing Nasserism and communism, but also Sadat's policies. Dissent and discontent was expressed and formulated in religious language and terminology. Once they had gained popularity, and afraid of the charge of being anti-Islamic, Sadat could not afford to strike out against them. In trying to legitimate his position he also made use of the idiom of religion, declaring himself to be a just Muslim ruler of a state the basis of the twin pillars of faith *Iman* and science *Ilm* . Conditions meanwhile were such as to breed discontent. The government had embarked on the open-door policy by promulgating new laws to encourage foreign investment, which had adverse effects on the local industries.The country was flooded with luxury and consumer goods far beyond the reach of most Egyptians. The open-door policy brought sudden wealth for a few, together with blatant corruption and avid consumerism. Most Egyptians experienced its negative effects through the governments retreat from internal development and the public sector. Matriculations at the universities continued at a high rate while the public sector, the chief source of employment, was cut back. Unemployment,an unproductive workforce, and the growth of bureaucracy, strained government resources.

To ease the strain,laws restricting emigration were relaxed, and benefitting the professional classes as well as unskilled workers, who left for the Arab oil states, generally for a limited period of years. Whereas remittances from abroad soon became Egypt's main source of hard currency, unemployment was not reduced, and brought about rather a brain drain of the most skilled and employable. Further,returning migrants from the rich oil states, apart from joining the ranks of conspicuous consumerism, returned with an envious resentment of the treatment

41

they have received and the disparity in resources they have observed (Duval,1989). The Camp David accord, which tied Egypt to the United States in favour of alignment with the West and accommodation with Israel, was another major factor fostering discontent. The United States was pouring large aid funds into the country, which created an uneasy political and economic alliance. This alienated Egypt from its traditional place as a leader in the Arab World. This loss increased the opposition of the Islamist groups, who critizised the regime's lack of leadership and moral decay and presented alternatives. In this tense political atmosphere, women's status and family roles were also thrust into the political arena.

The political situation is aggravated even further by economic difficulties, which deprived Egypt of the chance to regain its position of leadership even as it seeks to renew its ties to the Arab World. Apart from having a very high foreign debt, Egypt's economy suffers from dependence on remittances and tourism, both of which have fallen in recent years (Abd El Khalek, 1982). A major drop in remittances occurred after the Gulf War in 1991 when most migrants returned from Iraq, a major receiver of Egyptian labour. Tourism was affected mostly this year, 1993, due to the bombing of tourist targets by militant groups which caused a number of tourist fatalities.

Nearly all over the Muslim world, the decade of the 1970s seems to have been a period in which religion has played the leading role as a means of expressing discontent. Islam has replaced Arab nationalism as the ideology of dissent in the Arab World. In face of present day challenges, nationalism is perceived as inadequate or as having exhausted its purpose. Whatever may be the case, the fact remains that Islam has an undeniable influence on the political process, and has proven to have a strong potential for politicization. This was exemplified in the Iranian Revolution of 1978, the incidents of the grand mosque in Mecca in 1979,and the assassination of Egypt's President Sadat on 6 October 1981. On the national level, we can follow the recent events on the Egyptian political scene. The assassination of Farag Fouda[4] by an Islamic group last year, the attempted assassination of the Minister of Information on 21 April 1993 and the series of clashes between police and the Islamists in Assiut,Upper Egypt, but also in different quarters in Cairo (Imbaba,Heliopolis), and the series of attacks on tourist targets, amply serve as examples . The confrontation between the police apparatus and the Islamists has reached its peak on the Egyptian political arena . Violence on part of the regime in the form of mass arrests, mass shootings, imprisonment without trial, torture, death penalties etc., have created a climate of counter-violence by the militant Islamic groups.[5] The government, in a desperate

---

[4] Secular anti-Islamist writer.

[5] A group called *Jihad*, whose spiritual leader Omar Abd Errahman is currently living in exile in the U.S.A., has taken responsibility for some of the killings and bombings. It is the most militant group operating in Egypt today and is usually blamed by the media for any unrest created.

attempt to stifle even the non-militant Islamic trend that has largely permeated Egypt's different syndicates of engineering, medicine,journalism, law, academies and science, has issued a number of decrees to restrict their autonomy and thereby created a general air of discontent among all Islamists .

The Islamic Alternative

During the 1970s, Egypt witnessed more than one group advocating an 'Islamic Alternative'. One group of intellectuals exposed and opposed 'Western civilizational imperialism' and called for an Islamic left, *al Yassar al-Islami*. Other groups were the Muslim Brothers *al Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, the Military Academy (MA) *al Faniyya-al-Askariyya*, the Repentance and Holy Flight group (RHF),*al-Takfir -wal-Hijra*, and the *Jihad* group [6](Ibrahim,1982).

Whereas they differed in their perception of the actual situation that needed to be changed, they basically agreed on the necessity for and the direction of change. Other groups such as Muhammed's Youth *Shabab Muhammed* and Soldiers of God *Junud Allah* also existed. Recently, two groups by the name of *el Shawqiyyin* (in reference to their leader whose name was Shawqi) appeared in Upper Egypt and another one named the Party of God *Hizballah* in Alexandria (al-Ahram,1992)
.

By virtue of having engaged at one time or the other in confrontations with the regime as well as through their writings, these groups have attracted public attention. It also has to be kept in mind that there may be groups that have gone underground and of which nothing is known.

I propose to distinguish between groups that I term action-oriented, like those mentioned above and semi-action oriented groups, like the *Salafis*, *Tabligh*, and *Zahra*. This distinction is important to differentiate them from the less worldly sufi brotherhoods in Egypt that are non-action oriented, but still have popularity. The *Salafis*,[7] the *Tabligh*,[8] and the *Zahra*[9] are groups that have gained tremendous popularity in Egypt. They are interesting not only because of their ideological synthesis between the action-oriented groups and the Sufis,but also because of the emergence of the numerous women's groups within them. The further focus in this

---

[6]   *Jihad* in Arabic means struggle or enormous effort to achieve a cause. It is important to note that these groups do not call themselves RHF, MA or Jihad. These are names given to them by the authorities and the media. Members of the Jihad for example call themselves the Islamic group of Egypt, *Al Jamaa al-Islamiyya fi Misr.*

[7]   Salafis or Salatiyyin means the righteous followers of the "Salaf el-Saleh" the true believers in the prophet's time and after. Their loyalty is towards Saudi Arabia and their Ulama (religious scholars) as are the form of Islam they are conveying.

[8] Lit. to inform (in arabic). It is their duty to tell about Islam.

[9]   A group originally initiated by a Syrian women in Syria. In Syria it might have a different name in Egypt it calls itself Zahra. They have an Islamic women's organisation in Cairo that they also call Zahra in reference to the daughter of the prophet Muhammad Fatima el Zahra.

article will be on the women in these three groups, as well as the action-oriented Muslim Brothers *Ikhwan al-Muslimun.*

The Muslim Brothers-Past and Present

The Muslim Brothers were founded by Hassan El-Banna in 1928. They were fiercely anti-British and anti-Western. The movement sought to lead the people back to a purified Islam, which would penetrate every aspect of personal and national life, and free the nation from Western domination. The Muslim Brothers were opposed to the government and the political parties, which they saw as importations of Western ideologies and as tools of British domination. The parties were monopolized by the upper classes,who were participants in and beneficiaries of foreign economic domination. Anger at Western domination and determination to attain independence from it were central to the movement. Al-Banna emphasized the important role of women in the Islamic reformation, and a branch organization, the Society of Muslim Sisters *El Akhawat El Muslimat* was established. Another Islamist women's organization at the time worth mentioning, is the Muslim Women's Association, which was founded by the Islamist Zeinab El-Ghazali in 1936. El-Ghazali, although independent, supported the cause of the Muslim Brothers, and the definition of the role of women in an Islamic society coincides with that expressed by the Muslim Brothers:'Islam does not forbid women to actively participate in public life. It does not prevent her from working, entering into politics, and expressing her opinion, or from being anything as long as that does not interfere with her first duty as a mother, the one who first trains her children in the Islamic call.'(El-Ghazali,1980) El-Ghazali's increased cooperation with the Muslim Brothers was interrupted by the intense persecution of the Brothers, as well as by the murder of Hassan El-Banna in 1949. She herself was imprisoned and tortured for six years (1965-72) at the hands of the Nasser regime. The Muslim Women's Association continued to function until her imprisonment in 1965, when it was dissolved. It has not been reconstituted since, though El-Ghazali continues to lecture and work for the Islamic cause. A few months ago, a newspaper by the name of The Arabic Family *Al-Usra-Al-Arabia* opened in which Ghazali was active. It was issued by the Muslim Brothers, but was quickly banned by the government after four issues.

The Muslim Brothers epitomize the most important development in the 1980s. They have progressed beyond preaching towards institutionalization, and are committed to the establishment of an Islamic socio-political order based on Islamic law *Sharia* (Ibrahim,1982). This progression has made itself felt in two ways. The first was their sophisticated participation in the parliamentary elections of 1984 and 1987 and hereby their acceptance of political pluralism. Secondly, they gradually but steadily established an Islamic infrastructure which includes schools, hospitals, clinics, investment houses and other commercial enterprises. In contrast to the services provided by the government, these enterprises are cleaner,sometimes cheaper, and less bureaucratized. Being often as clean and

certainly much cheaper than what has come to be known as the *Infitah* or Open-Door enterprises, they increasingly gained in popularity. This rapidly mushrooming infrastructure has undoubtedly given the government some breathing space, but has also increased the popularity of the Muslim Brothers even more.

Joining the *Jihad* group in the 1970s was one alternative to express frustration and dissatisfaction, whereas in the mid 1980s joining the Muslim Brotherhood was a more attractive, less demanding, more comfortable and respectable alternative. Their efficiency in stretching out their hands in times of crisis to the masses reached its peak after the devastating earthquake of October 1992. The ability of the Muslim Brothers to mobilize their network instantly to provide food and shelter for the poor and homeless whose houses had collapsed, exposed the governments inefficiency and its meager and belated efforts. (Time, 1992). The political triumph achieved by the Muslim Brothers sufficiently alarmed the government,- especially as elections were coming up- that it struck out against the Brothers by issuing a number of decrees to limit the autonomy of the unions and syndicates that had become increasingly Islamised. This, in my opinion, increased anew the appeal of the violence-oriented groups, and can be witnessed in the increasing violence used by these groups in Egypt.

Ideology of Semi-action Groups

Whereas the Sufis have a strong belief in saints and their ability to influence or affect personal destinies through their prayers to God, *karamat*, and usually visit their shrines and ask for their help and blessings through their special connection with God, the semi-action-oriented groups reject these beliefs with repugnance:
'It is totally forbidden and sinful *haram* to worship saints and ask them for things,or even have the remotest believe that they can intervene in our destiny. This is a form of heresy *shirk*. Islam is built on the Oneness of God *Tawhid*. Only God can make our destiny, only God can alter it, and it is only Him we should ask help or forgiveness. There is no intermediary between any person and God. The people who do this are ignorant and don't know their religion properly.' (Interview with member of Tabligh group) .

The Sufis believe in a vertical and personal relationship between the individual and God which is strengthened through worship and prayer. Ultimate happiness and peace are the fruits of such a bond ,but are also rewarded in the Hereafter. Therefore, for the Sufi, worldly matters including the conditions of state or society are of minor importance as long as inner peace is reached. Unlike other parts of Africa or in the Maghreb where Sufis were politically active, the Sufi groups in Egypt are totally depoliticized and are in no way a threat to the regime. On the other hand, for the 'Salafis,' the 'Zahra', and the 'Tabligh,' societal change is one of the main aims strived for, but can only be reached by the inner transformation of oneself. All Muslims should unite to bring about a society governed by the ethics of Islam to ensure justice and equality for all.

'If everyone follows the deeds of the Prophet Muhammed, no human being would harm the other, and there would be no evil'(Tabligh member). Although the Salafis and the Tabligh are not in open confrontation with the regime as they avoid any political involvement in form of speeches or writings, yet they criticize the reluctance of the government to implement the Islamic Law *Sharia* in all aspects of life, the increased corruption and moral decay that is apparent in Egypt, and the immoral behaviour among men and women in a mixed environment. 'Just look at the crowded buses where men and women stick to each other, and any man putting his filthy hands wherever he pleases on any woman. Do you call this liberation or development for women ? (Tabligh member)

These groups, though totally incapable of destabilizing the regime in any way, were encouraged by the government in order to play down the strengthening voice of the *Ikhwan el-Muslimun* who were more action-oriented and in open opposition to the government.

However, recent arrests of members of these groups and allegations of social disorder might be a sign of their increased politicisation. Meanwhile, media coverage and TV programmes on prime time were suddenly opened to a number of *Salafi* leaders who propagated their ideas via TV, video tapes, books, magazines, tapes, and religious study groups at homes and mosques.

These groups share with the Sufis the notion of self-discipline and purification of oneself from previous sins. The focus of change lies in the inner being, which would then reflect on the outside, and eventually on the whole society. One of the members summed this idea up by quoting a verse from the Koran: 'God would not change a community unless they change what is in themselves ' (*Lajughajer Allah ma bi qawmen hata jughayyiru ma bi anfusihim'*). Change is considered an inner process growing gradually to the outside:'Everyone should start by himself, and ask himself how the prophet Muhammed was, and how his followers 'Sahaba' were, and try to be like them. Only then, when they followed the teachings of the prophet can they tell other people what to do and order them to do the good and leave the evil *amr bil marouf wa al nahiy an el mounkar* (Member of Salafi).

Muslim Sisters

Women's groups affiliated to the Muslim Brothers were more engaged in direct politics than women of the other semi-action oriented groups. A number of them were members of the People's Party *El-Shaab* (previously socialist, but now increasingly Islamist). Most of these women have a higher degree of education and are in some form or another related to the academia, which makes the form of teaching and discussions more intellectual and sophisticated, rather than the oversimplified logic presented in the other groups.

Local newspapers are regularly and carefully read by these women. The mastering of at least one foreign language (French, English,German), gives them access to the international debates and discourses in the different media. They are thus able to form a more holistic picture of how Egypt fits into the global world

system. 'During the whole of last week, there was nothing in the government newspapers except how Mubarak was cordially received in USA on his trip, and how the United States desperately looked forward to his visit. In reality Mubarak's visit received very little coverage in the Western mass media in general, and what they did say about Mubarak and his policies was not that positive although he is perceived as the 'hero' or 'champion' of what they call 'moderate' Islam and 'democratic' Egypt. In fact, Clinton didn't spend more than fifteen minutes with Mubarak. That's how cordially he was received. (Comment from member of *Ikhwan*)

Women in the *Ikhwan* group, see it as the duty of devoted Muslim to change the society around them into a more just and egalitarian form that match Islamic perceptions. They express their ideas in meetings, gatherings, public lectures, and writings.

'It is our duty as Muslim women to have a say in the politics of our country and the politics that shape our lives as women. Politics is not only the realm of men, as many men want to propagate. On the contrary, it has been made our primary concern throughout Islamic history 1500 years ago, when the women gave the Prophet their vote (*Baiya*) personally. We were equally addressed, and were equal partners in matters of the state. This is, however, not the notion most Muslim men carry. Somewhere, the perception of women being only bodies fit for the kitchen or the bed lingers in the back of their heads. (Leader in *Ikhwan*).

Social Profile

These women's groups gathered mainly to serve educational purposes (reading, explaining the Koran and the Sayings *Hadith* of the Prophet. At the beginning of my attendances at group meetings, the personal atmosphere surrounding me was one of suspicion and reluctance. My affiliation to a foreign institution in Sweden and my partly European origin seemed to be drawbacks. The potential use of this research was put into question, and questions were posed whether the idea of doing it was mine, assigned to me, or proposed by members of my department or university. Taking the constraining political situation into account, this attitude was hardly surprising. Perhaps also the somewhat justifiable conspiratorial theory deeply rooted in Muslims through the history of the crusades and the latters hostility towards anything even remotely related to Islam, and the continuation of this hostility in a different form in the contemporary political culture of the West, has contributed to a powerful rejection of Western culture or ideals.

'We don't want the West, and we don't care about the West or what they think of us. They have a hatred in their hearts against us that is blinding them and blocking their hearts and minds from any understanding of how we want to live. So is the case of all unbelievers who have sickness in their hearts. By the will of God,we will have victory over them'(Member of Tabligh).

In any case, trying to penetrate a world that was courteous yet continuously on guard was a difficulty I had to cope with at the start. Being a Muslim myself

helped in becoming more familiar with the women, suspicions slowly eroded, and a trusting relationship was established. In this context my foreign affiliation and origin proved to be helpful. In fact, they were able to draw on any identity they liked, depending on the situation.

The meetings were generally held twice a week and took place in mosques as well as in homes and study circles organised for children in different age groups. Usually the leader, and two or three other women would be responsible for the lecture. Sometimes, Islamist women from outside the group, like former actresses, would be invited in to talk. Egyptian actresses have been Islamicising in vogue. Some of them abandoned their acting career whilst still at the height of success. These women are looked at with a sense of euphoria and are taken as symbols of how fame,beauty,wealth and power, are not comparable to the beauty, wealth and power of Islam. 'Shams (a former actress) had fame, beauty and everything she could ever wish for, but she discarded everything and chose Islam. In it found real happiness. This is the real example we should follow! '(Member of Salafi)

Although the meetings included women from all strata of the society, there was a heavy presence of the middle class. All age groups were represented, with a predominance in age group between twenty to thirty. Single as well as married women flocked to the meetings. Another interesting characteristic was the appearance of many different forms of veils, as well as women who were bareheaded. Women in the *Tabligh* and *Salafi* groups usually tend to wear a face-cover *Niqab*, whereas the *Zahra* women usually have a form of headscarf, and the *Ikhwan* prefer a large headscarf covering the breasts or reaching even to the waist called *Khimar*. This distinction, however, could not be made among the groups as all variations existed and there was no clear-cut line. The majority of the women attending were not aware or did not find it important to know to which Islamic tendency the group belonged.

The regular attendance in a group was based on their adherence to the general Islamic trend *El-Tayyar-El-Islami*. The psychological and social dimension are given as among the most important elements promoting adherence. Inner calm and resolution, often described as a feeling of inner peace brought about by formal or public alignment with Islam, are prominent in the women's accounts (Radwan, 1992) . This conclusion conforms also to the findings of this study. Women often stated that 'they had become calmer with their husbands', 'were able to deal better with family problems' and 'weren't easily bothered by minor things like before.' They also felt a sense of community and of communality of values that comforted them. There was a big emphasis on sisterhood and love for one another in the name of God (*El Hub Fil Lah*). This was to be the main form of group interest or solidarity regardless of any material or personal interest. A member of Tabligh expressed it in this way:'*El Hub Fil Lah* is the purest and most sincere form of love, because I don't love you for being rich or beautiful, but because you share with me the love of God.'

Their talk revolved mostly around Islam, apart from inquiring about each others health and children. They were urged to read more and to be active and did not indulge in light conversation, which according to them is a waste of time. A

48

common theme in the lectures was presented as follows: 'We as Muslim women should get prepared and equip ourselves with knowledge to preach Islam. Muslim women should not sit for hours in front of the TV. Our main concern should be 'Datwa': to preach Islam and invite other people to Islam, not to watch 'The Bold and the Beautiful' (leader of *Zahra*).

Another common theme is the emphasis on Islam as a religion as well as a state *Din wa Dawla* regulating all aspects of life and opposed to the secular 'immoral' West where there is a separation between state and church. The Western life style is often put into stark contrast with Islam. TV serials like Dallas and 'The Bold and the Beautiful' shown on Egyptian TV give further inspiration: 'Now the West worship a new kind of God. Their God is called 'do anything you like'. There are no rules or limits. Men and women go around almost naked in the streets, they kiss and touch each other in public, and in the name of liberty they sleep around as they like. Women are exposing that which should be private as a cheap commodity to anyone. Can this be called women's liberation, civilization or development? The West is disintegrating, and their people are lost amidst high crime rates, drugs and sexual perversity. Islam prevents all this.' (Member Ikhwan)

The *Nef* Veil

Veiling is now common among university students and young professionals.The Islamic trend became more prevalent among men and women in both categories. Whereas the term *muhajjabat* in Arabic means the 'veiled ones',the veil does not necessarily have to cover the face. However, for both sexes the Islamic requirements of modesty in dress, in the sense that it should not be sexually enticing, should be met. Robes should be loose fitting, long-sleeved and ankle length, and should not reveal the contours of the body. Conforming to this code, men and women have developed styles of dress that are actually quite new. It is neither the traditional dress of Egypt, nor Western, nor Arabian, although all three elements might combine. For women depending on how modesty is defined, a variety of headgear and face coverings with different colours and thickness of material is observed. Men may wear baggy trousers and loose shirts.

Islamic dress is also a way of affirming ethical and social customs. Mixing among the sexes in universities and in workplaces, as is the social reality in Egypt today, becomes less offensive. As one observer of the Islamic phenomenon put it, in adopting Islamic dress women 'are carving out legitimate public space for themselves', and public space is by this means being redefined to accommodate women (El-Guindi,1982). The adoption of the dress does not declare women's place to be at home, but on the contrary legitimizes their presence outside it. Consequently, the prevalence of the Islamic mode among women cannot be seen as a retreat from female autonomy and subjectivity. The availability of education, the entry of women into universities and professional occupations, cannot be considered regressive, no matter how conservative the appearance of the uniform may look like, in helping them to achieve these goals comfortably. Islamist women

are also invading the mosques, previously a male domain. Some men may resist the sharing of their power,but at the same time they are defenseless as the process is taking place within the legitimate dominant culture. The charge of being anti-Islamic by not supporting the women in the Islamic trend is an accusation most men don't want to be confronted with. Women are not only making use of this political space, but are constantly equipping themselves with examples from Muslim women in Islamic history which are used to legitimize their position.

'Aisha, the wife of the Prophet transmitted three quarters of the 'hadith'(sayings of the Prophet), she was on the battlefield side by side with the Prophet, and even led a war against Ali after the Prophet's death. When Umar Ibn El Khattab wanted to deprive Aisha from performing the pilgrimage, she resisted fiercely. We as Muslim women should follow her path.(leader of Zahra)

Another member of the Ikhwan said:

'During the time of the Prophet women attended the prayers from dawn to sunset. No man has the right to deprive a woman from her Islamic mission. Submissiveness is only to God and not to any human being (*La Taata Li Makhlouk Fi Maseyyet El Khaleq*). A Muslim woman should fight for her rights, even if this means in some cases divorce.

Using this pretext, women's freedom of mobility has increased. They are able to move freely, attend lessons and weddings with the other sisters, without the necessity of the consents of their husbands,fathers, or brothers. Similarly a member of a Salafi group expressed her anger at a man who didn't want her to attend to her lesson with a group of children in the main part of the mosque-usually the men's domain. 'It was degrading and humiliating the way this man looked at me, as if I were nothing- a piece of garbage. He waved at me with his hands as if he was scaring off a little dog and ordered me to confine myself to the women's quarters which is very small and terribly hot now in summer. I thought to myself, I am wearing the Islamic dress, and am totally respectable in every way, so I just gave him my back and ignored him totally. I heard him mumbling in anger and then he went away. I think he learned a lesson he will never be able to forget.'

The leader of the Salafi group mentioned a sit-in the men's part of the mosque, when a man shouted at them from behind the curtain to lower their voices.'We should demonstrate for our rights and next time make the lesson in the men's quarters in order to have more space. They are not going to die if they switch to our place twice a week.'

The Islamic dress also brings a variety of practical advantages for women. On the simplest level, it is economical. Women adopting the Islamic dress are saved the expense of acquiring fashionable clothes and having more than two or three outfits. The dress also protects them from male harassment .

'Being totally covered saves me from the approaches of men and hungry looks. I feel more free, purer, and more respectable' (member of Tabligh).
That *El-Ziyy El-lslami* does not resemble traditional dress is perhaps a significant fact. In modern times traditional dress has come to be confined to the lower classes and the peasantry.

50

Traditional dress, therefore, identifies the wearer as being from these classes, whereas *El-Ziyy-El-Islami* might be seen as a democratic dress that to a large extent erases class origins. In previous fieldwork conducted in rural Egypt, a peasant woman pronounced these class distinctions clearly: 'Only educated women can wear the *Hijjab*, but if a peasant woman wears it, people will make fun of her. The wearing of Islamic dress and Islamism as a dominant discourse of social being is marked by a vocabulary of dress and social being defined from below by the emerging middle-classes rather than by the formerly culturally dominant upper classes.

Renegotiation of Gender Relations

The *Hijjab* voices the protest that many women dare not voice directly to their husbands, and perhaps that many can not articulate completely even to themselves.'The lecturing, reading, and the many activities with the sisters make me very busy, and most of the time the house is in a mess, but my husband doesn't get angry because he knows my Islamic obligations'. (leader in ikhwan) 'Men should help women in housework.Any man is not better than the Prophet who used to bake the bread and sew his own garment when cut.'(member of Salafi)

Although women's protest might be indirect and displaced into the symbolic realm, however, the previous statements by women can be read as signs that significant negotiations of power are taking place.Through veiling and Islamism women's protests can be voiced and perhaps ameliorated in at least three dimensions of inequality: in relations of gender, class, and global position. In the realm of gender, for instance, these women are perceiving a different womanhood, they are hearing the ethical, just, egalitarian voice of Islam and are demanding its implementation in their family politics. By singling out elements from Islamic history, or as one woman said 'educate women in what their real rights are in Islam',Islamist women are indeed starting to challenge the androcentric dominant culture of established Islam that is hostile to women and the language of the politically dominant. Central issues, such as marriage and divorce and the custody of children, are looked at from an Islamicised women's perspective. Islamist women claim, for example,that any conditions can be stipulated by the wife in the marriage who wishes to protect her rights. This may include the freedom of choice in working or not, restriction of polygamy, and custody over future children. The fear of easy divorce by men of women, as is the case now in established Islam, or of no possibility of divorce when the wife asks for it, as dissolution of the marriage contract lies in the hands of men, is considered a distortion of Islam, brought about by some male Islamic scholars *ulama* as well as by men who didn't understand Islam properly and abused these rights. A practical solution for these women and within accessible political reach, is to give the wife full autonomy to dissolute the marriage contract herself without waiting for the husband's consent. This was found spelled out in the teachings of Muhammed Abduh, an Islamic

scholar in the 19th century, as well as by one of the first feminists Zeinab-El-Ghazali, but also in the early Islam of the 7th century, and was therefore considered totally legitimate.

In the area of class relations, the veil is a very potent signal. The veil allies women with modest middle-class women and differentiates them from lower-class women. There is also a strongly felt anger over the loss of traditional values that has accompanied the overwhelming thrust of modernization and development, and which is epitomized in veiling and Islamism. In reaffirming the values they hold as important and in an attempt to make it real again, identifying themselves with Islam, shows their connection to a vibrant and powerful culture, a culture they wish to hold on to, as opposed to the invading culture of the West. For Islamist women this nationalistic and anti-Western aspect has been perhaps the most salient. What they are actually protesting is the vision of womanhood presented by the West, the image of the future imposed by modernization, and the inflation caused by economic dependency on other powers.

'Modernizing' Women

Middle Eastern societies began undergoing a fundamental social transformation by the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Foreign colonial powers dominated the area whether formally or informally, and by the economic encroachment of the West, the region was incorporated into the world economic system. 'Modern' states emerged, and were the paramount political transformation. This period witnessed enormous vitality in the literary, intellectual, social, and political life of women. For the first time women emerged as a significant subject for national debate. Issues of polygamy, the treatment of women in Muslim custom, easy male access to divorce and segregation were ventilated openly for the first time. These issues were first raised by Egyptian male intellectuals, and were intertwined with nationalism as well as social and cultural reforms that they believed were important for national 'advancement' .

Qasim Amin, an Egyptian French-educated upper-class lawyer, was one of the first towards the end of the nineteenth century to write a book where he called for the unveiling and liberation of Egyptian women. Amin's book, *Women's Liberation* (Tahrir El Mar'a 1899) marks the entry of the debate around the veil, in which the veil epitomized Islamic inferiority. This debate was incorporated into mainstream Arabic discourse that has recurred in a variety of forms in a number of Muslim and Arab countries since then. Amin's call for unveiling was followed by many in Egypt of whom upper-class background and some degree or other Western affiliation was a typical characteristic.

The discussion of women and reform was mostly linked to the 'advancement' of European society and the need for Muslims to catch up. The new discourse that emerged connected nationalism with women and cultural change rather than displacing the classical formulations on gender. Nevertheless, the first three decades of the century marked a feminism that was visible intellectually,

organizationally, and politically. Women started to contribute intellectually by writing in a variety of women's journals that they founded and organizations for the intellectual improvement of women appeared. Politically, they were members of women's political organizations paralleling and actively supporting men's parties. The first feminist discourses and feminist analysis observed in this period, all originated from women from upper-class backgrounds .

Although these women marked a change in women's opportunities, yet like Amin they were mostly Westward-looking, affiliated themselves to the West, and adopted an outlook that valorized Western ways as more advanced and more 'civilized' than native ways. Well-known names of feminists of this period are Malak Hifni Nassef, Huda Sha'rawi, Saiza Nabarawi, Doria Shafik, and Mai Ziyada who pushed for fundamental reforms in the laws governing women. They demanded education and suffrage rights for all women. This was achieved after Egypt expelled the British and proclaimed itself a Republic with a new constitution in 1956. The monarchy was terminated by a military coup launched by the Free Officers in 1952. King Farouk was exiled and Nasser was brought to power.

Huda Sha'rawi, the pre-eminent feminist leader of the twenties and thirties in Egypt, founded the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923, the first Pan-Arab feminist movement in Egypt. The 1920s movement by Egyptian feminists like Huda Sharawi and Saiza Nabarawi to discard the veil remained primarily an upper-class phenomenon. It was linked with upper-class women's entrance into political life through participation in the struggles of Egyptian nationalist groups and political efforts to rid the country of the foreign presence. A member of the upper classes, and from a very early age, she had been guided by her thoughts and readings by Eugenie Le Brun, a French woman. Le Brun had conveyed to Shatrawi the common European belief that 'the veil stood in the way of their (Egyptian women's advancement' (Badran, 1987). Thus in the early twentieth century, and mainly through the EFU, the westernizing voice of feminism emerged as the uncontested and dominant voice of feminism in the Arab context. It affiliated itself with the westernizing, secularizing tendencies of society, predominantly the tendencies of the upper, and upper-middle classes, and promoted a feminism that assumed the desirability of progress toward Western-type societies.

However, as mentioned earlier, another totally different tone of feminism existed at the time. It was the strain of feminism promoted by Zeinab El-Ghazali who founded the Islamic Women's Association. Zeinab El-Ghazali campaigned for women and the nation in Islamist terms, whereas the other feminists of the middle decades campaigned for women's rights and human rights in the language of secularism and democracy. Whereas these feminists consistently stressed the superiority of the West in their feminist goals and actions, El-Ghazali was committed to indigenous culture and to pursuing feminism in indigenous terms. El-Ghazali had a determination to find feminism within Islam which is juxtaposed to the adulation of the West and the undermining of the native that formed the discourse of the other feminists. In advocating reformist ideas similar to

53

Muhammed Abdu's reformist ideas of Islam in the 19th century, she articulated a belief of a reformist Islam which also favoured women.

Until the last decades of the century, the dominant voice of feminism in Egypt as well as in the Middle East was marked by a Western-type feminism, whereas this second voice of feminism remained marginal. It was seen only as an alternative and was not even recognized as a voice of feminism. Ironically, as this century draws to its end, it is the feminism advocated by Zeinab El-Ghazali which seems to capture the hearts and minds of the Islamist women. It seems to have the greater resonance for the shaping of mainstream Egyptian culture, whereas the indisputably dominant voice of secularist, westernizing Arab feminism has become the marginal and alternative voice. In seeking to decode the reasons for the 'Islamic Trend', numerous sociological endeavours are focused on the dichotomies of nation-state/ civil society, tradition/modernity, a kind of 'Glaubenskrieg' between South and North, core/periphery, capitalist/pre-capitalist, rural/urban etc. Whatever the fabrics involved in feeding this process, it is obvious that the language of Western-type feminism has exhausted its purposes.

Conclusion

The idea that improving the status of Arab or Muslim or other non-Western women require them to abandon their own native customs is still prevalent in most of the Western feminist discourses. Analysts treat the debate as one between feminists, that is, Amin and his allies, or as 'anti-feminists', meaning Amin's critics. Taking these postures, they automatically accept the supposition made by Amin and the Western discourse: that the veil is a symbol of oppression. Consequently, those who called for its abandonment were feminists, whereas those rejecting that call, were anti-feminists. Assumptions are made by feminists that the adoption of Islamic dress, because it reflects 'conservative' and ethical social habits, also automatically connotes support of male dominance and female subservience. The possible 'feminist' positions taken by women adopting Islamic dress, positions supportive of female autonomy and equality, are articulated in terms totally different from the language of Western and Western-affiliated feminism. Investigators of the phenomenon must try to decipher this language in order to make an understanding possible. In times of social change and political opportunity there is an even possibility of inequalities either being reproduced or totally altered.

The logic of reproduction and real change are the same, and each time that a political opening arises, either result is a possibility. Just as the acquiescent aspects of women's behaviour can be singled out for co-option, so could the protesting elements be encouraged and developed. The Islamist women I came to know are involved in important choices in a struggle to define both their own identity and women's place in a changing society. They are attempting to discover an appropriate identity which fits their tradition as it redefines their future, which has also been the longer struggle of the Arab World. Negotiating their future is the

task these women confront with their move into the invasion of 'public space', whatever form this may take.

Fox Genovese (1991), writing of US society, observes that 'sexism instead of receding with the triumph of modernity, has probably become more general and more difficult to locate in a single institution'. She also confirms that late capitalist society 'has contributed a bitter twist to the centuries of female oppression'. Similarly, Michel Foucault articulated the view that modern forms of power are much more difficult to locate as they lack a center, or an 'eye'. (Foucault, 1972). In this context, Michel Certeau (1984) argues that subordinate groups turn to the use of small tactics as the only viable form of protest to bargain over modern forms of power. At the end,however,they might form a significant resistance, a strategy that is likely to be adopted by these women in their future struggle.

References

Afshar, Haleh 1985 "The Iranian Theocracy" in: *Iran: A Revolution in Turmoil* Ed.H. Afshar London, Macmillian.

Ahmed, Leila 1992 *Women and Gender in Islam. Historical roots of a Modern Debate.* New Haven and London, Yale University Press

Akbar, Ahmed S. 1992 *Postmodernism and Islam. Predicament and Promise* London, Routledge.

Badran Margot 1985 *Feminists, Islam and the Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt.* Princeton: Princeton University Press

Michel Certeau 1974 "Des espaces et des pratiques" in *La Culture au pluriel,* Paris:Union Général d'éditions.

El Guindi, Fadwa 1981 "Veiling Infitah with Muslim Ethic" in: *Social Problems* Vol.28 No.4

El Saadawi,Nawal 1990 *Islamic Fundamentalism: A Debate on the Role of Islam Today* London:IFAA BOOK LISTINGS

Evers Rosander, Eva 1991 *Women in Borderland: Managing Muslim Identity where Morocco meets Spain* Stockholm: Gotab

Foucauld 1972 *Archeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language* New York: Pantheon

Fox-Genovese 1991 *Feminism without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.

Keddie& Baron 1991 *Women in Middle Eastern History* New Haven and London University Press.

Contested Identities: Women and Religion in Algeria and Jordan

Wilhelmina Jansen

Woman and Muslim. Conflicting or Complementary Identities?

The Islamic resurgence in the Middle East has led for many women to shifts in perceptions of self as women and as Muslims. Their established identities are contested by new religious leaders who through the media and social control, impose a 'new' identity for Muslims with specific notions of gender and gender relations as important elements. As a result, women question whether their gender identity, how they feel, behave and represent themselves as women, is still in line with the propagated Muslim identity -how they should feel, behave and represent themselves as women.

Based on data gathered during anthropological fieldwork in Jordan and Algeria, this paper looks at how women try to reconcile new notions of femininity with a new identity as Muslims. On the theoretical level it discusses how people's multiple identities continually contest each other and how this must be taken into account in a theory of identity formation. It is also argued that insight in this process is essential to understanding women's participation in fundamentalist movements.

Introduction

'You are accountable for none but yourself' Koran, S.4:83

Aisha, a Jordanian woman of 23, is trying out new ways to present herself. It is spring 1989, a few weeks before the start of Ramadan. The coming of the fasting month has touched a deeply hidden religious spot in her. Up till then she considered herself a young careless woman, outgoing and attractive, a Muslim, but not thinking about Islam too much. She worked as a secretary to the Jordanian television station in Amman when she met her college-educated husband. The marriage was not as traditional as that of some of her sisters and friends: hers was not arranged by senior family members, the couple was not related, they did not move in with the husband's family but established themselves independently, and she did not stay home but found a new job as a secretary at the university in a nearby town. Aisha continued to dress and wear make-up as she was used to doing

56

as a girl and helped her husband make professional videos, including one which propagated birth control. When her second daughter was born she quit her job to take better care of her children. Now, after some months of being a full-time mother and housewife she decides that it is time 'to become serious' as she calls it.

But becoming serious is not without problems. She has many questions to ask friends, relatives and me to determine how to become a good Muslim and to start being accountable for herself. Most questions concern the modesty of her attire: 'Do you think the flowers on this scarf are too colourful?' 'Shouldn't I wear the scarfs I have rather than bring my husband to new expenses?' 'Is this dress too bright?' 'Can I wear high heels with a jellaba?' She also starts to question her previous behaviour: 'Can I still take the bus to town with my mother-in-law?' or 'Maybe I was wrong to have let put in an i.u.d. before giving my husband a son.' In the course of redefining her own proper behaviour, she also reconsidered the proper upbringing of her daughters: 'Is it bad to let my daughter ride a bike?' (As a non-Muslim I could not always give proper Islamic advice, only to the last question I convincingly argued that there was nothing wrong with a three year old pedaling her three-wheeled bike on the porch.)[1]

Many women like Aisha follow and support the religious revival in Muslim countries, and in doing so ask advice from relatives, peers and new religious leaders, and thus contribute to the proliferation of religious books, pamphlets, cassettes, television and radio programmes and study groups where questions of religion and morality are discussed. A growing number of women turns away from their previous way of living and behaving and more or less adhere to 'fundamentalist' ideas.[2] At first sight there seems to be a complete change in identity: the symbols by which the self is presented are replaced by the opposite. The tight miniskirt is replaced by long wide frocks, the thin nylons become dark stockings, the radiant smile a withdrawn face. Colour becomes gray or black. Extroversion and outgoingness become introversion and seclusion. Secularism is

---

[1] The ethnographical data for this paper was gathered in a small town in Northern Jordan in 1989 and in a large provincial town in West Algeria in 1981-82 and 1984 (See resp. Jansen 1993b and Jansen 1987).

[2] Critics of the concept of fundamentalism have pointed out its christiancentric, ethnocentric, homogenizing, demonizing and a-historical character (Esposito 1992:8; Karam 1993:4, Jansen 1993a:32-33, n. 16). The alternative, 'Islamism', however, sounds less ethnocentric but suffers equally from the problem of suggesting homogeneity and a-historicity, can neither do justice to the differences and flux within Islamic movements, and suggests an objectivity which might not be there. The term fundamentalism on the other hand, enables fruitful comparisons between similar movements in different religions and points to many analogies in the centrality of gender in symbolism and ideology and in the effects on gender relations (Riesebrodt 1990, Hawley 1994). Moreover, there is nothing wrong in taking a critical stance as long as this is made explicit. These are valuable reasons why many continue to use the term 'fundamentalism' (as in Munson 1993:151-152, Jansen 1993a; Hawley 1993; Marty & Appleby 1993). The main reason why I use the term Islamism alternating with, but more prominent as fundamentalism, is my anthropological tendency to use emic concepts wherever possible and relevant.

replaced by religiosity. But is it indeed such a radical change of identity as it looks from the outside for the women involved? How do women themselves perceive this change? To what extent does this new self, or the presentation thereof, conflict with the old self? Why do they construct such new identities?

In this paper I will look at the shifting notions of self of Aisha and other women and how their multiple identities continually contest each other. Gender is an important element in Islamist or nationalist identity politics. Gender is also an important identity element by itself, in how women define themselves as women. How women combine (or struggle with) their different identities is essential in understanding women's participation in Islamist movements. The main aim of this article is to show how women use Islam as a stock of symbols, signs and signals, not only to change their religious identity, but even more so their personal identity in relation to their most significant others.

Notions of Identity

The concept of identity is at present in flux. Josselson (1987:12-13), a psychologist interested in identity formation amongst women, wrote: 'In psychodynamic terms, identity is neither a structure nor a context but a property of the ego that organizes experiences. It is an amalgam, according to Erikson, of constitutional givens, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, psychological defenses against inner conflict, significant identifications with important others, interests and social roles. In a sense, we might think of identity formation as the assembling of a jigsaw puzzle in which each person has somewhat different pieces to fit together.' She is quite confident that most people will manage to put the jigsaw puzzle together and have a sense both of internal coherence and meaningful relatedness to the real world. She describes in her books several examples of how women 'have found themselves'.

Others have disputed this notion of identity as a sense of self and of wholeness that can be 'found', as if it were a construct that is 'there'. They rather present a picture of identity as something that is continually in construction, a puzzle that is never finished and always mixed up with other puzzles. For instance Judith Butler (1990:25) said: 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'. Identity cannot be found but only created in an ongoing process within specific power constellations. Butler therefore demands that students of identity investigate 'the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin' (ibid:ix) In other words, for women gender as an identity category is not caused by women's sex, but the result of the complex interaction between women and the persons, institutions, symbols and power structures around her.

Contradictions in identity arise because people belong to different groups in relation to which they develop a social identity at the same time (Tajfel 1978,

58

1982, Skevington & Baker 1989). These groups, and the person's position in them, make conflicting demands on the individual. Especially women are confronted with conflicting identities imposed on them. First, because they more often belong to the less powerful groups and so have less influence on the models of femaleness being imposed on them, and on the representations of themselves as subjects. Secondly, because certain combinations, such as being a caring parent and a professional, remain inherently problematic (Roland 1979) and seem to be more a problem for women than for men.

Moreover, the impact of each group -- be it the family, the religious community, ethnic group, peer group, or work environment -- shifts over time in conjunction with the lifecourse of the individual. Family relations and connections with the home become stronger when a woman marries and has children, while relations with friends tend to lessen. The self is continually and rapidly shifting as Ewing has shown in her seminal article 'The Illusion of Wholeness. Culture, Self and the Experience of Inconsistency' (1990). She argued that people give plural, inconsistent self-representations which are context dependent. At different times and in interaction with different people, a different aspect of the self comes to the fore, and a different element of one's identity is presented. Nevertheless, people experience them as one, often fail to see how they are changing, and prefer to think that the contradictions are or should be resolved. This idea finds its parallel in the Foucaultian concept of the dispersed subject, which states that people's identity is constituted through subject positions set up in discourses which are specific to place and time in history. This process largely occurs unconsciously and does not prevent people from feeling a sense of wholeness. Moreover, it is not restricted to non-Western cultures, which are supposedly more contextual and relational, but a universal semiotic process (ibid, p. 251).

On a cultural level the illusion of wholeness is constructed by symbolic means. Clothes, rituals, or behavioral rules, which may include rules on such diverse areas like food-taboos, greeting forms, body posture, or use of machines or public space, give a sense of continuity and constancy to identities. They serve to identify those who belong and to differentiate them from those who do not belong. For the participants themselves, it heightens the awareness of who they are, and creates a sense of belonging and difference from others (Cohen 1995:53). This is all the more urgent under conditions of intense political, economic or religious conflicts in the wider society. Shifts in identity on the individual level then intertwine with shifts in collective identities. The wider context influences the form and the content of the symbolic expression of the different elements of the self and the speed with which these change. The overt and visible choices of symbols by individuals may give an indication of the reconciliation of the demands of the various levels on the individual, but only partly and temporarily so. Observers tend to read a more constant and fixed identity out of the use of these symbols than is intended by the users. When women start to use an Islamist veil and thus emphasize one type of identity (religious), do they perceive themselves as having acquired an Islamist identity which contests their previous religious identity? And how do they reconcile this with their other identities as secretary, mother,

daughter, video-assistant or designer of high tech factories. How do they recreate the illusion of wholeness under these new conditions?

Shifting Boundaries between Self and Group

The question is to what extent the symbol of veiling really stands for a change in identity, and specifically in which identity. Asad urges us to unpack 'the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as 'religion' into heterogeneous elements' (1993:54). Part of this is, in my view, to see the new veiling not as a strictly religious symbol, but to show how it is intimately linked to social life and power relations therein. If it is strictly seen as a religious phenomenon it may be explained as only a communication of a profound change in private religious beliefs rather than also of other changes in social life and one's identity. As the questions of Aisha show, she was more involved with the symbols of her religion than with doubts about her beliefs. For her, her beliefs did not change; what was more significant was the way she would from now on express them, and take them seriously. After having settled down as a homemaker and mother of two children, she wants to be respected as such. Although she did not pray regularly and because of her pregnancies was not very serious about keeping the fast, she does not consider her plans to pray and fast more regularly now, as a change in belief. On the contrary, it is more a confirmation of the beliefs that were always there. When she uses Koranic citations now more in discussions with her husband, she refreshes her memory of things learned long ago, rather than applying a totally new discourse. Women like Aisha have always considered themselves Muslims. Only they used to be young and careless and not yet serious. Their new religious practices form more a confirmation of what they already were and what they believed but never showed, than a totally new religious identity.

The large variety in the degree and form of female veiling reflects the variation in the alternative modes of self-image. Of the growing group of modern veiled women that wear 'Islamic dress', only a small minority experience a profound shift in religious identity. The distinction between the days of ignorance, before they became religious, and the days of *hidaya* or the current situation, is very important for these radical fundamentalists. They are far stricter in their practices, for instance in their relations with non-related men or non-Muslims. The types of veiling they adopt reflect their attitude: they use gloves, completely cover their face with a *niqab*, and preferably wear dark colours. Religion is a major preoccupation in their lives, and they are somewhat impatient and scornful with the fad followers who choose daring colours and styles or who make only halfhearted attempts to discover the merits of a more religious life.

A larger group of women is far less sure what is the proper way. By asking others' advice about how to express what is already there, Aisha seeks to align herself to the moral consensus of the religious group and thus make the boundary between herself and the religious environment more permeable and her identity more defined through them. Let me compare Aisha's case with that of Nawal, a

60

young Algerian woman who also took to the veil, because it shows some striking similarities. Despite the socio-economic and political differences between Jordan and Algeria, resulting in a much larger adherence to fundamentalist movements in Algeria, on the personal level the experiences of the women seem to have much in common. When I met Nawal in 1981 she was an unmarried Algerian career woman who had studied law and now occupied a top position at a large state firm in one of the larger towns in Western Algeria. She lived in a villa provided by the firm, dressed in smart suits, and was regularly driven by one of the chauffeurs to the headquarters in Algiers for a meeting. Nawal considered herself a good Muslim, kept the fast, but did not pray regularly. Ten years later she was married, had three children and quit her job (in that order). She prayed five times a day, did not leave the house without her husband's permission, and veiled herself. When we discussed her plans to take on the veil in 1984, she said it made her happy to be able to clarify her identity in that way. Just like Aisha she did not consider it a change in beliefs but rather an intensification and explication of them. She had always considered herself an outsider in the community because of her exceptional way of living, but now she felt 'back home' again. Aisha and Nawal now both define their self more through the religious community, but one of the causes and of the consequences was that their identity became more differentiated from that of another group: the family.

Cultures differ in the way the boundary between self and others is drawn, and thus in the measure of autonomy accorded to individual identity, as well as in who are the significant others. In Jordan the most significant others were always family, and individual identity was and still is strongly defined by family relations. This was illustrated by the reaction of a Jordanian student whom I gave a low grade for an exam paper. He said: 'I can't get an F because I belong to the (tribe of) M's.' At that time I did not yet grasp the meaning of this remark, only that he considered it a strong argument in his effort to make me raise his mark. Jordan is still very much a tribal society in which tribes are hierarchically ordered and vying for power through control of its individual members. Family ties and the power of the family name can be decisive in getting a partner, a job, entrance to the university and even in getting good grades. In the student's view, his grades should match his family's status, rather than his personal ability. Moreover, he used his tribe's high rank and power as a threat to his teacher, which, if the teacher had been Jordanian and more sensitive and obedient to local power hierarchies instead of a foreigner who did not know who the M's were, might have had some effect.

Another example of the hold of family over the individual, and of the predominance of family identity over individual identity, can be found in the family associations (jama'iyya). The main goal of such associations is to enable regular contact between family members, for instance by providing facilities for family gatherings, usually in the form of a guest house which is used for weddings, circumcision feasts, or the parties of the unmarried males. The family associations also function as insurance- and saving-funds. Some have special arrangements to save for the education of the children, others provide loans to

members and/or provide mutual support at death. The strong social control this leads to is exemplified by the case in which a young man found the guesthouse of his family closed on the day of his wedding. He had reserved the hall for his wedding party, but his cousin had locked the door and taken the key to protest that the groom had not shown sufficient familial respect. He had planned a wedding while his clan was still in mourning for an aunt who had died two months before, and moreover he had preferred to marry a 'stranger' rather than one of his cousins.

Women's boundaries of self are considered to be more permeable than men's in many cultures. This is expressed by the term 'relatedness'. Josselson (1987:175) says that the process of anchoring is critical to the process of identity formation of women because the self is experienced so much in relation to others. She distinguishes four areas in which anchoring takes place: primary family, husband/ children, career, friends. In this anchoring women may differ from men. Women are for instance less tied to a career and more tied to their children, as a result of which loss of a job will less likely lead to an identity crisis. Women's identity is therefore more marked by relatedness; as Josselson says identity is not a matter of being but fundamentally a being with.[3]

A similar phenomenon can be noticed in Jordan where women's identity depends even more on the family than men's identity. The naming system is very much indicative of this. Small children are often called by the term they will later have to address the speaker with, and thus made aware of the proper family relation. A girl might thus be called *'ammi* (lit. 'my uncle') by her father's brother, and *khâlti* (lit. 'my aunt') by her mother's sister.[4] People in general are often identified by their family relation, as father or mother of someone, or daughter of so and so. But this is far more often the case for women than for men. A woman is seldom called by her first name, but rather as '*bint*-X', daughter of X, before marriage, '*â'ilat-Y*', family of Y, after marriage, and '*umm*-Z', mother of Z, after the birth of her son.[5] These words anchor women to others and express their relatedness to relevant others to the point of ignoring their individual identity. The name symbolizes that a woman's choices are the choices of others. Before marriage X will decide how she dresses, where she goes and whom, when and where she marries. When the father is replaced by the husband, Y will decide when and where she goes or whom she shall see, and when both father and husband have died, Z will take over and decide how and where his mother will live. Female obedience is especially required in the field of sexuality and modesty. All control over their sexuality and any references to it have to be put in the

---

[3] R. Josselson, lecture Seminar Identity and Development, September, 27, 1990 Amsterdam.

[4] I would like to thank Farha Ghannam for her comment on this and other topics.

[5] Only exceptionally is this order reversed. One legendary woman managed to have her son called after her instead of her being called after her son. Stories are told about her, that she took decisions like a man, talked at the well with the men, and composed poems like men. These stories show the potential breaks in the norms but at the same time serve to reinforce the general pattern.

control of men. Men are urged to impose this control by sayings like: *'Hamm al-bnât lemma mât'* (Protect the girls until death.). Since *hamm* also means anxiety or concern, the underlying notion is that a father will be troubled by the presence of his daughter until she dies. The names by which a woman is called express a deep-felt conviction that a woman's identity is subsumed under that of the family group. The total subordination of her own identity to that of her family is a symbol of the strength of the group, her modest behaviour a symbol of the family's status and honour.

The transfer of authority from the father to the husband, however, is the first weak point in the ideology that denies an autonomous self to women. Whose authority is decisive, that of the father or the husband? Moreover, in practice, women as living actors are not always able or willing to conform completely with the orders of the males of the family. An example can be found in the case of 26-year old Jordanian Amina who wanted a divorce. Dissatisfied with her second husband, who locked her up in the house she ran home. Her brother brought her back and tried to reconcile the couple, but as soon as she could she ran home again. Then her husband accused her of adultery (in an effort to avoid the obligation to pay a *mahr muta'akhkhira*), to which her father and brother reacted vehemently. It meant a blemish on their honour and they tried to convince the husband that if his wife was adulterous it was his fault and he was to blame and not her parents. The father negotiated a divorce with as main argument not that his daughter was unhappy or the marriage not working, but that the husband was unable to command her obedience. Meanwhile her eldest brother blamed her father and her husband for not listening earlier to his warnings that the young man would have difficulties in controlling such an experienced woman with children. The subject of the discussion, Amina, withdrew and did not talk with them, but in the meantime had her own way, while the men contested each other's authority and inability to effect it.[6]

The norms of obedience are often far removed from reality. Formerly women had to leave home to fetch water from the well and wild herbs from the field, or help herd the goats or bring in the wheat harvest. Now an increasing number of women finds work in schools, offices, and institutions. Both Zohra, my 48-year old neighbour, and Mûna, her 20 year old daughter, were and are often out of sight and away from the authority of the responsible male. Zohra recounted how hard she had to work since she was eleven years old, after her mother had died and she had to take over her mother's share of the land labour as well as the housework for a father, six brothers and a mentally ill sister. She did everything,

---

[6] The question of women's identity of daughter versus wife also returns in discussions on membership of family associations. In most associations women leave the one they belong to by birth for the one of their husband, at least for the financial aspects which now are arranged through the husband. But she and her husband will continue to be invited to the social gatherings twice a year of her clan of birth, because, as they say: 'hiyya bintnâ', she is our daughter. Establishing a woman's identity in these terms is essential for the claims on her obedience.

mowed, reaped, bound up the sheaves of wheat and winnowed, she ground the grain by hand, kneaded the dough and baked the bread in a self-made furnace. Life was difficult then and the father's permission for her activities out of doors was taken for granted rather than asked. Her daughter, who was born on the land during the harvest, studied to become a licensed nurse and recently found employment in a hospital in the next town. Mûna is formally engaged to a bus driver whom she met on the bus to school. He encourages her to work to save for her trousseau and their new apartment to be built on top of his father's house. Her independence is not very compatible with the ideal of complete obedience and she suffers from the results of this inconsistency. While on the one hand she holds a responsible job where she often has to work at night and regularly comes into contact with unrelated men, on the other hand she is scolded by her fiancé for walking unchaperoned from his parents to her parents house (about 300 metre). She has to copy him in presenting their marriage as an arranged one, in line with the ideal, instead of giving the romantic version that they fell in love on the bus. In short, the norms of female obedience are still vivid, and there are many efforts to enforce them, but women resist being moulded even more than before.

The ideal of women's identity as being dissolved in the identity of the family group includes her religious identity. Her religious behaviour and belief is supposedly made subject to male parental approval. Antoun, who described the religious lessons by which Jordanian Muslims were made familiar with Islamic ethics, paraphrases one preacher who said in 1960: 'A woman may not undertake a voluntary supererogatory fast without first seeking the permission of her husband. The purpose of this rule is not to discourage fasting but to stress the necessity of the obedience of the wife.' (Antoun 1993: 616). He voices an ideal that to a large extent is still upheld today. The incorporation of women's religious identity under that of her family is expressed by the saying 'a woman follows her husband', which means that upon marriage a woman takes her husband's religion. The imperative for women to obey the husband is larger than the imperative to be a believer. This idea is the basis for the Islamic rule that Muslim men can marry a non-Muslim woman, as this leads to an increase in Muslims, but a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man, as she would loose her religion.[7] That the woman is not treated as an independent agent is further corroborated by the statement than when this happens, it would be her father who is to blame for her apostasy as he arranged her marriage.

Men's control over women's religious identity even extends into the hereafter. Jordanian women told their conviction that upon the death of a woman her husband can veto her entrance to heaven by not forgiving her for being angry with him, even if it was his fault.[8] Some women however believe that this gendered

---

[7] This last type of marriage is not legally possible in Jordan.

[8] It is their personal interpretation of a widespread belief that believers upon their death must be pardoned for their faults by their co-religionists. The community of believers can thus decide if a person is to be saved.

64

fate is not absolute, and that age or parental authority can give them a similar right. During a discussion on a decorative wall hanging with the maxim: 'Heaven is under the feet of the mothers', one woman explained that women can earn heaven by bringing up their children well and that they can also decide on whether their sons go to heaven. A son who is not forgiven by his mother will never go to heaven. The religious identity of social minors, a status which women keep during most of their life, is decided by their family. This control of the family over a women's religious identity illustrates that the kin group tries to be more influential than the religious group, and to make kin identity more important than religious identity.

During the last twenty years, however, the lines between individuals and their family have been redrawn and made clearer, and previous loyalties have been questioned. The power of families over the religious identity of their members is waning. Female actors always tried to balance the different identities according to the circumstances. New is the use of Islam by women. First, they claim a more autonomous religious identity, the reasons for which I will show further on. Secondly, by claiming religious responsibility, they defy male parental control in more than the religious domain, and protest against hierarchies within the family. Drawing upon Islam a generation gap is (re)created. Women are creating a niche to make their own decisions by playing out the different loyalties.

To obtain a change in their position, women historically have used several of the identity strategies identified by Skevington and Baker (1989) and Tajfel (1978). The first is *assimilation* which involves the adoption of the positive features of the high-status group by the low-status group who wish to join them. The second is social *creativity* whereby the subordinate group seeks to create a new and positive image for itself through new symbols, language, history etc. or through the reinterpretation of negative features. The last is social *competition* when the subordinate group challenges the basis of the status hierarchy and seeks to change the relative power and status of groups by active or passive resistance.

There are theoretical limits to this political project. Such as the claim of a collective identity based on gender for such a diverse group which is internally divided by lines of class, colour, or nationality. Or the danger of an essentialist notion of gender identity, which feminists would want to avoid, but which Islamists use to their advantage. The different perspectives of the participants, their historical and hierarchical relations, as well as the cultural symbols and rituals used, must be taken into account. This is easier to do if we start with certain individuals in specific contexts. Despite these warnings, all three strategies can be recognized in the identity politics of women Islamists.

Islamism as an Identity Strategy for Women

The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi calls Islamic fundamentalism a 'statement about identity' (1987:5). For both young men and women it is a protest against established economic, political, religious and moral hierarchies. When

identity organizes experiences, as Josselson (1987:12) states, it must be asked which experiences have to be dealt with. In the literature on the Islamic revival the influence of the economic and political crisis has been frequently discussed (Wagtendonk & Aarts 1986; Antoun & Hegland 1987, Marty & Appleby 1993; Zebiri 1993). A dominant picture in the literature on 'fundamentalism', especially by its critics, is that 'the people' (read 'men') are in crisis, due to economic, political and moral chaos, that they adhere to 'fundamentalist' ideas in order to change the world. In their zeal to establish a new moral order they use 'the modest woman' as a symbol and force real women of flesh and blood to retreat to the home. In this picture, compulsory veiling is analysed as a mechanism of social control of women, and 'symbolizes the lack of choice in the selection of identity: identity in the form of *hijab* is imposed ' (Moghadam 1993:143). But this bombardment of women with their normative identity is only one side of the matter. Not only is the male offensive not as effective as often supposed,[9] it also leaves out the role of women.

A subdominant picture is provided by studies start out from a woman's perspective (e.g. MacLeod 1991; Zuhur 1992) and try to answer the question why women adhere to fundamentalist notions. Women not only respond to Islamist movements and adapt their identity accordingly, they actively take part in these movements, and use Islam, just like men, to shape their identity. Outside observers may not like that in doing so these women take over the idiom of their oppressors and limit their freedom of dress and movement, simplify reality and exalt their domestic activities. But portraying them as vulnerable victims of an objectionable ideology is a missed chance for understanding the rise of Islamism and the meaning of Islam for women's identity. It is also an unsatisfactory answer to my wondering why Aisha and Nawal suddenly decided to become serious, given the fact that none of their family nor their immediate surroundings tried to push them in that direction. Aisha's own parents let their daughters decide for themselves what to wear. Nor did her in-laws neither insist on Islamist dress or behaviour; her mother-in-law, who did not veil, had often extolled my decent dress when we were visiting, thereby implicitly commenting on the much shorter skirts of her daughter-in-law. But decent dress for her did not necessarily mean Islamic dress. She scolded her own eldest married daughter once that she could better prove herself as a good Muslim by helping her parents rather than by covering her head with a veil. Nawal's mother never abandoned her traditional Algerian haik, but never expected her daughters to veil, whether they were married or not. She even complained when one of her daughters was forced to veil by her in-laws. Neither Aisha nor Nawal felt that an identity was forced on them, but rather that they were

---

[9] The effects for instance on women's participation in the labour market is limited. Even in Iran women's average participation became not significantly lower after the revolution, although female judges and top officials lost their jobs, and many educated women fled the country (Moghadam 1988; Tabari 1986; Ramazani 1993).

expressing their own selves, and subsequently impressing these identities on their husbands.

To explain the appeal of Islamist movements among university and educated women, it is important to show that not only the boys are in crisis, but that the girls are even more so. Women who actively become Islamiyya seemed until a few years ago still comfortable in school or at work, and not afraid to use public space. Their life at that time seemed far removed from that of their mothers, who were hardly literate and who likely had moved from the countryside into town. Their fathers were still associated with low status jobs like agricultural or industrial worker and their mothers kept full seclusion and veiling whenever they could afford it in this urban environment (cf. also Ahmed 1992:222; Zuhur 1992:63). The young unmarried daughters saw themselves as different from their mothers. They had moved up a few social steps and learned the latest Wordperfect program on the computer rather than how to spin wool. They sat on chairs rather than sheepskins, walked outside with friends rather than remain secluded, and worked in a bank or office rather than in the kitchen. But this difference put a heavy strain on these young girls. The gap with the milieu of the mother was acutely felt, moreover their dealing with the modern world was filled with frustrations.

Just like the boys,the girls could not cope with the economic situation. Economic changes led an increasing number of women like Aisha and Nawal to follow an education, seek paid employment and aim for the symbols of independence: an income, Western clothes, freedom of movement, mobility -- maybe even a car-- and decision-making power in economic matters. But they were frustrated on two fronts: due to the economic malaise it soon became difficult to obtain the coveted material goods. Higher education brought no longer the high gains promised, although the modern amenities and luxuries kept staring down at them from billboards, and was flashed at them by the conspicuously consuming elite, and by soaps and commercials on television.

Moreover, even when gained, the new freedoms proved to conflict very much with the traditional identity of daughter and wife. The family relentlessly demanded familial loyalty and obedience. As in the case of Mûna's financé, they kept imposing norms which could not be combined with the exigencies of paid work. A young university professor complained that at work she is responsible for a whole department, its students and curriculum, that she studied in America and drive everywhere in her car, but that at home her father expects her to take the man he choses and to leave all her property behind when she marries and her brothers expect to be served whenever they see fit and ask her to account for every step she takes and every person she talks to. In her daily contacts she has to fight for respect, because she is a women and people doubt her sexual mores. The wider society does not accept the take-over of the public space by schoolgoing girls and working women.

Especially Nawal felt this non-acceptance acutely. Living in a provincial town she had felt quite unhappy because she was not married yet, and people gossiped about her independent living. It was particularly difficult to maintain a measure

of authority over her male subordinates. Women who adopted features of the higher-status males such as education, public space, careers, political office, smoking and driving, challenged the basis of the gender hierarchy. They became competitors with men for power resources. Men who saw their authority and dominance dwindling, could find in Islamist ideology the terms and the arguments to strike back. Drawing on the traditional equation of spatial boundaries with sexual boundaries, women's coming out of the home was seen as a loss of sexual control. And the reaction was in that same line: strict sexual mores had to be reestablished by stricter rules for the use of public space for women and by regulating the public visibility of women's bodies.[10] At first sight, women increasingly seem to yield to this pressure, but many of them do so in a subversive way. Young women who feel frustrated with the future and with the past, solve it by creating an alternative image of woman and themselves which is neither the image of a Western women nor the image of their mother. The first symbolizes a separateness and loneliness they do not aspire to and the second implies a relatedness and obedience they want to escape.

In women's use of Islam, the three above mentioned strategies can be discerned. By veiling, women partly assimilate to this dominant normative model. They retake established ways to gain respect: veiling, modest behaviour, segregation of the sexes. They also seem assimilated in the use of the respected source-books, the Koran and the Hadîth, and the use of fragments of one's personal and collective history to create an identity. They study the sources and write history, for instance the life stories of Muhammed's wives, to serve as role models for present day women.

More important however is social creativity, the second strategy in identity politics. For although old symbols and histories are used, they are put in a different form to create a different identity. The veil of the new Islamists is very different from that of their mothers. The change in form betrays a significant change in meaning and in the women underneath. The new veil no longer refers to the respectful women secluded in the home, as previously, but rather to the young career women, working in offices and travel agencies. The *hijâb* (a long sober overdress with a large headscarf) of the latter is more practical, international, sober, and uniform. By updating and upgrading an old symbol, young women have sought to create a new and positive image for themselves, features previously considered negative have been reinterpreted, loyalty to a larger, even international, Islamic community has been expressed.

The creation of a new identity to show to outsiders is an arduous and long process. Women seldom turn Islamist overnight. Aisha decided to wear long

---

[10] In the manifesto of one of Algeria's Islamic parties, Al-Nahda ('revival'), part of the goal "to spread virtuous morals and to defend them" is thought to be met by working for the abolition of mixing of the sexes in education, administration, health services and other work-places and establishments (Zebiri 1993:215). Twenty years ago, in Algeria, an unveiled woman taking the bus, risked to be taken for a prostitute; today she risks being beaten on the legs, or worse, being killed.

clothing and go veiled a few weeks before Ramadan, the Holy Month which usually releases more religious sentiments. But she postponed taking action. She would say: 'Tomorrow I will do it,' while she put on her finest city clothes, did her face in full colours and went shopping in town. Her sister-in-law encouraged her by giving a beautiful black shawl embroidered with hundreds of bright little flowers. She wore that for a while and clearly loved it. She kept saying: 'Isn't it pretty?'. I nodded, and bit back the remark at the tip of my tongue that veiling is not meant to make a woman prettier but rather less appealing. Instead I teased her by saying that now she might not be able to wear that pretty winter suit she had just bought. She said she would put on boots with that so that her legs were covered. Her traditionally embroidered dress, a present from her mother for her trousseau but never worn, was recovered from the bottom of a trunk and let out. In the first week of Ramadan she went with her husband to an Islamist store to order an overgown, grumbled about the drab colours, and realized her previous choices had been too fancy and bright. With a sigh, she hid the pretty shawl in a drawer and also the embroidered dress returned to the trunk.

Many young women in Jordan and other countries go through a similar process. A comparison of the pictures in the *Yearbooks* of Yarmouk University illustrate the gradual increase in veiling. In 1980 of the female graduates 17% were veiled, in 1986 this figure had risen to 39% and three years later, in 1986, it reached 47%.[11] Many students are pragmatic about it. One student told me: 'My father hesitated to let me study, but my taking on the veil brought him around,' and another: 'At least now we do not get bothered so much by the male students.'

Finding the right symbols, and through them, working on a new religious identity happens in continuous interaction of the individual with her surroundings. On the way the most obvious conflicts with other loyalties and sides of one's identity must be solved. The new veil, unlike most of the traditional veils of Jordanian and Algerian women, is 'workable' as it allows economic activity. Unlike the Algerian haik, which had to be pressed against the body by the two upper arms and needed to be held with one hand before the face, the new veil leaves both hands ready to work, the eyes open to see and the mouth visible and audible. Moreover, the new veil expresses transnational anti-Western sentiments in its international uniformity. The image of the young veiled woman behind the computer is part of national pride.

[11] Veiling is related to the discipline of study. Especially students in Biology, Physics, Mathematics, and Chemistry wear veils (69% of female graduates) and women studying Arabic (67%), disciplines acceptable for girls under Islamic norms. Girls make up a large share of the student population in these disciplines. For example, in 1983/84 at Yarmouk University 31% and at the University of Jordan 58% of the students in the physical sciences were women. Veiled women can next be found in the English Department, probably for the opposite reason. In this case veiling prevents people from drawing false conclusions as to the girl's true loyalty when choosing this popular and prestigious discipline. Women in the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences go largely unveiled, as do the few women in Sports, Journalism and Engineering.

Paradoxically, the greater conformity with and dependence on the wider religious community, and the search for moral consensus, is used by people to take individual choices and be personally responsible. This obligation in the religious domain to be accountable for oneself and to be individually responsible for realising Islamic values, has effects on the social domain where individual responsibility and accountability are also claimed by women with the help of religious arguments. Here the third strategy of identity politics comes to the fore: social competition whereby the subordinate group challenges the basis of the status hierarchy and seeks to change the power balance.

Threatening the Cohesion of the Family: Widening the Generation and Gender Gap

In their creative strategy, young Islamist women may on the one hand seem to return to old symbols and bow to the generation of their parents, but on the other hand, by adopting a dress which is more international, sober, practical and uniform, and by adhering to ritual rigidity and a strict avoidance between the sexes, they react to and challenge old hierarchies.

Many women who turn more visibly to Islam take this decision themselves: the family does not impose this identity, although they cannot easily disapprove. Aisha is convinced that it is her own decision. When I asked what her husband thought about it, she answered: 'He said: you have to decide for yourself.' In reality, when she announced her decision to her husband, he said: 'That is better.' and then, turning to me as if defending her: 'Everybody thinks that is better. In our religion one has to dress shara'i.'[12] It was the first time however that I heard him say something positive about it, as he usually found her very attractive in her Western clothes and never gave any hint that he wanted her to change, nor did he have any tendency himself to adhere to new rules. When I asked for a reason, Aisha recounted how a week earlier she had walked to her mother-in-law in a short skirt and the neighbours had climbed to the roof to look at her. During her visit she had felt upset, because the skirt was too tight on her as she had not yet regained her figure after her last pregnancy, and it kept creeping up. Moreover, it cost too much money to buy nylons all the time. She would gain more respect and dress more cheaply in Islamic dress. Aisha felt she had to excuse her choice. Not that she expected disapproval, but neither had her husband, his family or her circle of friends suggested anything in that direction. On the contrary, she had little direct contact with other Islamists, nor would she call herself an Islamist.

---

[12] The reader may wonder about my own views on this. I tried to remain neutral rather than approve or disapprove. However, in discussions my pronunciation was several times corrected from *shara'i* to *shara'i*, the first word means 'from the street' with the connotation of 'whorish', the latter 'according to the Shari'a, the Islamic law'. The letter 'ain in the second word is difficult to master for a foreign speaker, but not unfamiliar or unspeakable to me. Was this maybe a Freudian slip of the tongue?

Some respected members of the older generation tried to discourage her and reacted with irritation at the young woman's zeal. When Aisha, dressed in her recently acquired Islamic outfit, visited her husband's great-aunt, the old lady reacted both to her veiling and my presence, by telling the following joke, warning us beforehand that it was 'not religious'. She said (I paraphrase her): 'It deals with the three important prophets. God said to the first, Moses: Go and select your people. And Moses looked over the people and selected from them the most beautiful women. Later came Jesus, and God said to him: Go and select your people. And Jesus went and selected the most beautiful women. When it was the third prophet's turn and God told him to select his people, there were only ugly women left, with wry faces and crooked arms. So Mohammed said: 'Cover your faces and follow me.'

Aisha did not smile, neither did I, as I was somewhat embarrassed about this Orientalist joke. Yet it made clear the old lady's objection to and distaste of veiling. Depending on their socio-economic background and their personal convictions, not all mothers react the same to their daughters' new veiling. In Egypt, some mothers had struggled themselves to come out of seclusion and considered the removal of the veil liberating; 'they are unhappy to see their daughters 'undoing' their gains' (Rugh 1993:163). In Algeria, where the process of giving up the veil by the mothers' generation was stopped during the Algerian revolution as the veil became a symbol of resistance against the French, it was more common to find veiled women who preferred their daughters to go unveiled, as in the case of Nawal's mother. Although they themselves kept the conservative *haik*, they wished for their daughters the liberty they fought for but never got. Nawal's mother was disappointed about the changes and would often sigh: 'We fought the war of independence for nothing.' The situation found by Rugh in Egypt, that mothers sometimes donned modern Islamic dress at the urging of their daughters, is seldom found in Algeria because a larger percentage of women still wear the traditional veil.

Despite these critiques, however, people cannot easily disapprove the striving for a better moral life. They might think it overdone, or not timely for a young woman who does not yet have to think about her afterlife, or not necessary for being a good Muslim, but parents, husband and other relatives cannot deny a young woman responsibility for her own deeds because she herself will be held accountable. Islamists hold each person responsible for her or his own salvation, and not only the family patriarch. They know Sura 4:84 'Therefore fight for the cause of God. You are accountable for none but yourself. Rouse the faithful: perchance God will overthrow the might of the unbelievers. God is mightier and more truculent than they.' (Koran, interpr. Dawood). Also women are required to make their own religious decisions, even if this implies that they contradict and disobey their father or husband. When negotiating their religious autonomy and a new power position, women often use the expression: 'No one should obey a created being in the disobedience of the Creator' (*la ta'at li-makluq fi ma'siyat al-Kaliq*) from the hadith. Many women have discovered in Islam a strategy for

increasing their decision-making power. When relatives refuse her this right, she will tell them her rights with the holy scriptures in hand.

This new-found autonomy is repeated in other domains. Aisha took to the veil during a turbulent time in her marriage. She had supported her husband in his proposal to buy a piece of land, yet without her knowing he had used her money but had not put the land in her name too. For weeks she was angry, refusing to cook for him and sleep with him. Wearing the new symbol made her confident in her beliefs and religious knowledge, so she started to quote Koranic verses to show that he was a bad Muslim because he had stolen her bridewealth and property. He could not but repent his wrongdoing. Peace returned to the household when he promised to have the property deeds written in the name of their two daughters. She announced she would go back to work again in order to refill her bank-account, and he better not dare say that it was improper for a mother to work because she was wearing Islamic dress and thus proved her modesty. It is significant that in using her religious knowledge to influence her relation with her husband she felt less insecure and did not ask others for advice. Nawal in Algeria also used religious knowledge in her arguments with her husband. He had started drinking and maltreating her at the time and by slowly interesting him in a more religious life she worked to improve his behaviour.

Not only the line between women and their husbands but also between girls and their fathers is redrawn. By turning Islamist they challenge the kinship hierarchy as well as the gender hierarchy. To use terms like 'sisters and brothers' for religious peers appears an assimilation to kinship values. But their implication of equality between women and men as believers defies the patriarchal ordering of women and men as daughters and fathers. Young women can find in Islamist ideologies legitimate excuses to defy the father's choice of marriage-partner when the proposed groom does not show sufficient religious zeal. The fundamentalist group will support them in arguing that religious loyalty is more important than loyalty to the family. Women use a religious idiom and religious symbols to defend their own choice to work, to use public space, to marry, but also to criticize their fathers and husbands for not giving women their due rights, for refusing them an education or their own property, for using alcohol and drugs, or for spending their money on the street rather than for their family.[13] A widening gap is acutely felt by many families.

When the daughter or wife decides to follow her own rules for dress and behaviour instead of obeying her male kin, conflicts may arise, not only because they might disapprove, but also because it is one of the few areas where women openly make their own choices *and can defend them*. Moghadam quotes an account by Coffman who was fascinated by the way young girls reconciled their fundamentalist lifestyle with their dream of succeeding in thermodynamics and become civil engineers. They told him that 'nothing irritated them more than the efforts of many Algerian men to veil their women by force and abuse them into

---

[13] For this protest character of the new veiling see also MacLeod 1991.

submission. 'I think it's scandalous how men dominate women in Algeria!' seethed Aîcha as she mechanically pushed an errant lock of hair back under her hijab. 'Listen, if I'm able to take on the *hijab* against the wishes of my father, another woman is also able to decide *not* to wear it, despite the wishes of her father. No woman should let herself be intimidated by a slap, a whack of the belt, or blackmail. A woman must stand up for her rights.' (Moghadam 1993:150).

The conflicts become more serious when they also try to impose their new moral behaviour on other family members. Islamist women set an example, both for themselves and for other women, but their exemplary and proselytizing behaviour is not always appreciated. Family members may get fed up with being called 'culturally un-authentic', 'western', 'degenerate' or 'blasphemous' (Karam 1993:10; Zebiri 1993:219) when they have been doing nothing more than they always did. Fathers and brothers do not like to see their authority contested by what 'the imam has said'. This has led to an irreparable rift in many families. Thus, a renewed adherence to Islam, may change both a woman's relation to her family of birth and to her family of marriage. Family and religious peer group are contesting each other's influence on women's identity. This contest and the slow movement from the family to the religious community as primary identity group leaves room for the development of her own individual identity. Her autonomy versus the family increases. This diminishes the hold of men over female relatives. Andrea Rugh noted the same reshaping of personal relations in Egypt, where youngsters defy the father in the name of Islam, and girls can for instance refuse the father's choice of marriage partner with the argument that the boy is not a good Muslim. Rugh states: 'Religious movements are uniquely equipped in this respect to redefine personal loyalties toward the higher entity of community without destroying the stability that comes from strong family institutions.' Although I agree with this transfer of loyalties, I doubt whether the stability of strong family institutions is left intact. Islamism is becoming a divisive element in many families.

It is the paradox of Islamic ideology, which places so much emphasis on family cohesion and hierarchy, that it is used by women to undermine the authority of the father or husband. While reproducing the kinship tie in Islamic idiom, they defy the kinship and gender hierarchy.

Conclusion

Women's multiple identities are changing in a continuous interaction with wider social processes. The very visibility of the symbol of the veil suggests most changes in religious identity. I have tried to show in this paper, however, that women's religious identity has not been radically changed. To the contrary; changes in their religious identity are not so much perceived as individual changes in belief system as in the ways these beliefs are expressed and turned into practice. Despite a new dress code, strict spacial and behavioural rules, informants would deny a profound change in identity in this respect. What was put more into

question was their familial identity. Resurgent religious groups demand loyalty to the *umma*, the religious community, over loyalty to the family and even over loyalty to male authority. Women were already contesting their relatedness and extreme subjugation to the family due to their increased autonomy in space, education or work. Dissatisfied with the past pattern according to which a woman's identity was subjugated to that of her family, and in which she only existed as daughter, wife or mother, but also frustrated with the Western model of women as career women, they applied social creativity as a strategy to mould old symbols, idiom and history into an identity that contained multitudes, and that was continually discussed and remade so that it could be experienced as one.

Let us take a last look at Aisha and Nawal. Both accommodated to the norms of the people they felt close to, but on their own terms. They did not take their mothers veil or followed their mothers' secluded way of life, but took on a new veiling as both a symbol of religious autonomous responsibility as well as of their presence in the public domain. Both used it to protest against their husband. Veiling might also have been a form of protection against gossip about their relation with me, a non-Muslim and Western woman. Again it would make their 'real identity' clear to significant others. This decision to 'become serious' involved them in a complex decision-making process. They had to answer questions they never had to answer before and they had to rely on their own judgement as never before. They both used it also to request respect for their motherhood, Aisha for producing only girls, Nawal for liberating her from paid work when the combination of a full-time job with three small children became too strenuous. She convinced her husband to sell his car and take his duties as provider more seriously so that she could stop working.

Despite the very different national contexts in which Aisha and Nawal live, they show some similarities in the arguments they use to explain their choice and in the contextual elements that make such a choice understandable. Of course not all women have the same reasons for turning Islamist, nor share the same socio-economic background. The modern media, however, have helped to spread the discourse and the symbols that young women can draw from to orient themselves in this new endeavour. International exchange of information should not be underestimated in enabling women to formulate what they want in an Islamic idiom. It is on this level that women's Islamism from such widely divergent countries as Algeria and Jordan can be compared.

What does this mean for theory on fundamentalism? First, women have reasons for adhering to fundamentalist ideas and practices that are both similar to men's but also their own special reasons for adhering to fundamentalist ideas and practices than men. If we look at the literature on Islamist movements, and how this takes women and gender into consideration, we see that most of it departs from males as constituting the main body of Islamists. It has been argued here, however, that the growth of these movements cannot be understood properly without taking account also of women as a driving force behind them. If gender is mentioned, it is usually as an important issue in Islamist discourse, or in the context of the detrimental effects of Islamist movements on women. Neglected,

however, is how women with the help of Islamist idiom construct their own gender identity which includes the right to study and to participate in the political and economic domains. Authors who describe the attractiveness of Islamism for women do so hesitantly, as they do not want to be considered apologists for an anti-rational, exclusive, potentially violent belief system. The problem lies in fundamentalism being both negative and positive for women, and in the importance of taking both sides into account.

Secondly, it was argued that when Islamist movements are interpreted as fundamental changes in religious identity the symbols are overrated. A visible change in the symbol of the veil does not necessarily imply a fundamental change in belief system. Besides overrating the change in religious identity, this has as side effect that other identity changes, such as patrilineal or gender identity, are overlooked. Changing family and gender relations are both cause and effect of fundamentalism, and not only in negative ways.

References

Ahmed, Leila (1993) *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Antoun, Richard, (1993) 'Themes and Symbols in the Religious Lesson: A Jordanian Case Study,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 25:607-624.

Asad, Talal (1993) *Geneologies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore & London:The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Botje, Harm (1994) *Het duivelshuis*. Amsterdam: Prometheus.

Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.

Cohen, A.P. (1995) (orig. 1985), *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Routledge.

Esposito, John L.(1992), *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ewing, Katherine P. (1990), 'The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self, and the Experience of Inconsistency' *Ethos* vol. 18, no. 3:251-279.

Hawley, John Stratton,(1994) *Fundamentalism and Gender*. 1994 Oxford: Oxford U.P.

Josselson, Ruthellen (1990) *Finding Herself. Pathways to Identity Development in Women*. San Francisco: Jossey Bas.

Jansen, Willy,(1987) *Women without Men. Gender and Marginality in an Algerian Town*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Jansen, Willy,(1993a) *Mythen van het fundament*. Nijmegen: SUN.

Jansen, Willy,(1993 b) 'Creating Identities. Gender, Religion and Women's Property in Jordan,' in: M. Brügmann et al. (eds), *Who's Afraid of Femininity? Questions of Identity*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 157-167.

Karam, Azza M., (1993)' 'Fundamentalism', 'Modernity' and Women's Groups in Egypt: Activist Women's Realities,' *MERA* Occasional Paper no. 20, dec. 1993, Amsterdam.

The Koran (1990) transl. by N.J. Dawood. London: Penguin.

MacLeod, Arlene Elowe (1991) *Accomodating Protest. Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Marty, M.E.; Appleby, R.S. (eds.) (1993) *Fundamentalisms and Society. Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family and Education*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.

Mernissi, Fatima (1987) *The Fundamentalist Obsession with Women. A Current Articulation of Class Conflict in Modern Muslim Societies*. Lahore: Simorgh. Women's Resource and Publication Centre.

Moghadam, Valentine,(1988) 'Women, Work and Ideology in the Islamic Republic', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1988:221-243.

Moghadam, Valentine,(1993) *Modernizing Women. Gender & Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder, Lynne Rienner.

Ramazani, Nesta,(1993) 'Women in Iran: The Revolutionary Ebb and Flow', *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 47, no. 3:409-428.

Riesebrodt, Martin (1990) *Fundamentalismus als patriarchalische Protestbewegung: Amerikanische Protestanten (1910-28) und iranische Shiiten (1967-79) im Vergleich* Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).

Roland, A. (1979), 'Identity as an Orienting Concept,' in: A. Roland; B. Harris (eds.), *Career and Motherhood. Struggles for a New Identity*. New York: Human Sciences Press pp. 47-54.

Roseman, M.,(1990) 'Head, Heart, Ordor, and Shadow: The Structure of the Self, the Emotional World, and Ritual Performance among Senoi Temiar,' *Ethos* vol. 18, no. 3, :227-251.

Rugh, Andrea,(1993) 'Reshaping Personal Relations in Egypt,' in: M.E. Marty & R.S. Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalisms and Society. Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family and Education*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, pp. 151-180.

Skevington, Suzanne; Baker, Deborah, (eds. 1993), *The Social Identity of Women*. London: Sage, pp. 1-14.

Tabari, Azar,(1986)'The Women's Movement in Iran: A Hopeful Prognosis', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2,:343-360.

Tajfel, H. (ed.1987), *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. London: Academic Press

Tajfel, H. (ed.1982), *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Wagtendonk, Kees; Aarts, Paul, (red.1986), *Islamitisch fundamentalisme.* Muiderberg: Coutinho.

Zebiri, Kate, (1993) 'Islamic Revival in Algeria: An Overview,' *The Muslim World* vol. 83, no. 3-4: 203-226.

Zuhur, Sherifa, (1992) *Revealing Reveiling. Islamist Gender Ideology in Contemporary Egypt.*Albany: State University of New York Press.

Public Baths as Private Places

Marjo Buitelaar

In the film Halfaouine a Tunisian boy struggles to save the best of both worlds as he is bidding farewell to his childhood and taking his first steps towards adulthood. For boys in sex-segregated societies like the Maghreb-countries, growing up implies an irreversible transition from the world of women to the world of men. In Halfaouine, this transition results in a crisis when the boy accompanies his mother to the *hammâm* and is 'caught' peeping at one of the nearly naked women.

What I am interested in here is not so much the incident's symbolic marking of the protagonist's life-crisis, but the question why a boy's transgression should create such a state of frenzy among bathing women. There is not one single answer to this question. The public bath is a complex social situation which relates to many dimensions in women's lives.[1] In this paper I will use the example of the public bath in Moroccan society to discuss the sexual division of space that is characteristic of North African cultures. The major part of the article consists of a description of the main features of the organisation of social space and its correspondence to different notions of privacy. Next I will look into the paradox of the *hammâm* as the most private of public female domains. To a certain extent, the significance of this characteristic for women depends on their living arrangements, which both express and effect shifting notions of privacy. In the latter part of this paper I will therefore investigate how modernisation processes influence women's social relations and the differential importance of having access to female networks through the privacy of the *hammâm*.

---

[1] I first explored the significance of the *hammâm* to women during research in 1983-1984 in the town of Sidi Slimane, Morocco. This resulted in a (Dutch) master's thesis in 1986 in which I discuss the importance of the public bath for women in 1) creating and sustaining social networks, 2) participating in the community of Muslims by adhering to Islamic notions of purity and purification, and 3) marking transitions that women make from one stage of life to another through specific bathing rituals. In 1992 and 1993 the first public baths for Moroccan and Turkish women in the Netherlands were opened. In the meantime, I had developed a specific interest in the relation between the gendered experience of religion and the construction of (Moroccan) female identity as a result of my Ph.d. research into the meanings of fasting for women during Ramadan (cf. M. Buitelaar 1993.) These circumstances led me to take a fresh look at my 1983-1984 material and extend it with new fieldwork in the Dutch *hammâms*. This paper is mainly based on the 1983-1984 material.

The Concept of Privacy in Anthropology

It is common knowledge that social organisation in Muslim countries in the Middle East is predominantly based on a sexual division of space. In accordance with the Islamic moral-legal code, men and women spend their daily lives in relatively separate spheres. Women's domains consist mainly of the house and the neighbourhood, while workplace, coffee shops, the market, the mosque and the street are typically men's domains. Schools form an interesting mixed domain, where more explicit male and female zones tend to arise among students as they get older.

Western educated anthropologists have easily been tempted to sum up such spatial arrangements by stating that women operate mostly within the private sphere and men in the public sphere. In the 1970s feminist researches who were in search for grand theories to explain the universal subordination of women saw a causal relation between women's lack of power and what they perceived to be a greater preponderance of women in the domestic sphere and men in extra-domestic spheres. It was believed that women were nearly universally confined to the 'private' sphere, which prevented their access to authority, prestige and cultural values. These were thought to be the prerogatives of men, who competed for these sources of power in the 'public' sphere.[2] This view was soon corrected by studies that showed that women could exert considerable informal power within the 'private' sphere and were also often able to influence decisions taken in the 'public' sphere through their husbands and sons.[3]

Since then, awareness has grown of the difficulty in assuming that the private - public dichotomy is a universal one or that the criteria that determine what social situation people from varying cultures experience as 'private' or 'public' should be the same everywhere. Historians have pointed out that the Western interpretation of privacy as the right of a person to individual freedom and the conception of private and public spaces as mutually exclusive spheres are the result of slow historical developments.[4] More recent ethnographic evidence suggests that in many cases private and public zones cannot be assessed by physical dimensions alone, but may be defined by sound and sight zones as well.[5] Public and private domains may be measured not only by space but by a wider context including time, participants and activities. In order to do justice to the different notions of privacy experienced by Moroccan women, I follow Sciama in

---

[2] Cf. M. Rosaldo (1974) 'Women, culture and society: a theoretical overview.' in: M. Rosaldo & L. Lamphere (eds.) 1974.

[3] Cf. C. Nelson, 'Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World.' 1974, in *American Ethnologist* 1(3): 551-563; S. Rogers, 'Female forms of power and the myth of male dominance: a model of female/male interaction in peasant society.' in *American Ethnologoist* 1975, 727-56.

[4] Cf. N. Elias (1969) and B. Moore (1984).

[5] S. Ardener, 'Ground rules and social maps for women: an introduction.' In: S. Ardener (ed.) (pp.11-34) in S. Ardener (ed.) 1981:20.

defining privacy as the right or need of individuals or social groups to separate themselves from others at various times, or for certain well-defined activities.[6]

Moroccan Notions of Privacy

A low level of spatial differentiation in traditional urban Moroccan houses and the remarkably mobile character of the furnishings confirm the contextual understanding of privacy suggested here above. Rooms tend to be of the same shape and size. Although the quality and decorations of furniture may differ from room to room, all rooms are basically furnished with the same *sdâris* or small divans that are arranged along the sides of the walls. When a family disposes over more than one room, the husband and wife may sleep in a double bed in one of the rooms, but otherwise there are no specific bedrooms. Even if a house consists of several rooms, most members of the family prefer to sleep together in one room, either on the *sdâris* or on thin mattresses that are laid out every night. In the morning the blankets and mattresses are put away again so that the room can be used for other purposes, such as entertaining guests and eating meals. The *mîda*, a small round table also moves around a lot. When the weather permits family members may prefer eating the main meal at midday in the courtyard, but the table is rolled back to one of the rooms for tea or to serve a guest of high status. A now vanishing custom is for husbands to eat apart. In most families, however, when there are no guests all family members eat together. Meals are served from a common plate.

These sleeping and eating arrangements illustrate the high value that Moroccans attach to sharing. Except maybe for the parents, hardly ever does an individual member of the family have a room or even a plate 'of one's own'. Indeed, the Western notion of privacy as the right of the individual to time or space for him- or herself is relatively weak and is socially depreciated.[7] Moroccans seldom withdraw themselves from company and such behaviour is met with suspicion. People who seek to be alone may either be thought to be ill, in which case they should be closely attended to, or they may be suspected to be up to some mischief, in which case the presence of others may prevent them from carrying out their plans.

A notion of privacy that is much more highly valued by Moroccans is family privacy, the right to hide family life from those who do not belong to the *qurâb*

---

[6] L. Sciama, 'The Problem of Privacy in Mediterranean Anthropology' In: S.Ardener, 1981:89.

[7] Much to the annoyance of high school students, who have difficulty finding a quiet place to do their homework. Many of them take their books to the parks or sit down under a street lantern. This behaviour is more readily accepted from boys than from girls, who face the additional difficulty of being expected to participate in household chores.

or 'close ones'.[8] The importance of family privacy can be recognised in the spatial organisation of traditional Moroccan houses, which are turned inwards. Strangers easily get lost in the narrow, winding alleys that lead to the houses, so they stay away if they have no business there. The outside walls of the houses are high and if they have any windows at all, these tend to be very small, barred, and above eye-level so as to prevent passers by from peeping in. There is only one entrance to the house. The need to protect family life from the larger society can be illustrated by the fact that in cities in the Rif mountains in northern Morocco the front door is called *l-ltâm ad-dâr*, the veil of the house.[9] Behind the low doorway is a small corridor that leads to the courtyard. The courtyard often lies a few steps below street level and the corridor may have bends. Again, this obstructs the view of what goes on inside. The courtyard is called *wust ad-dâr*, the centre of the house. The rooms around it can only be entered from the courtyard and catch light from windows in the walls facing it.

The place where guests are invited to sit down is an indication of the closeness between the visitor and the host family. While it is an honour for a special guest to be invited into the most luxuriously decorated room of the house, creating a temporary guest room is also a way of hiding the privacy of family life from view. On the rare occasion of men inviting male guests who are not close family the visitors are inevitably received in a 'guest room'. Women, on the contrary, only seldom receive their female guests in a special room. If the weather permits, close friends are invited to sit on the roof or in the courtyard. Otherwise female guests may be received in whatever room the hostess happened to be sitting at the moment of their arrival.

These gender differences illustrate that men are more concerned with family privacy than women. A man hardly ever invites his friends to his house. His domestic life is not their business. Especially female members of the family should remain hidden from the outside world. Etiquette even forbids a relative stranger to the family to ask a man about his wife's health. A male acquaintance to the family will respect the family privacy by vaguely inquiring after *ad-dâr*, the house, meaning the members of the household.

Among women, family affairs are discussed more frequently and more detailed. Still, a female visitor does not readily mention the name of the husband of her hostess but is more likely to refer to him as *mûl ad-dâr*, the owner of the house. This is not only indicative of the power relations between the genders, but also points to the significance to women of gender privacy, the need and right of groups of the same gender to separate from persons from the other gender. By not mentioning his name, she distances herself from the husband of her friend.

---

[8] I use this emic term since it allows more room for more personal links between non-kin that may have developed over time as a result of common residence, fosterage, ongoing relationships after dissolved marriages, etc. Compare D. Eickelman (1981) 156-162.
[9] M. Cammaert (1985:81).

As in many Muslim countries, the notion of gender privacy is a dominant ordering principle in the social organisation and the corresponding spatial arrangements. In the company of other women, 'the brakes can be taken off certain impulses' as Moore (1994) describes the atmosphere of private groups to which individuals may temporarily retreat for protection and relief from the demands and obligations of larger society.

The house is associated with women's privacy to such an extent that it has developed feminine qualities itself. Walls are often painted in bright pink, blue or green colours that correspond with those of women's clothing. The divan covers usually have a flower design and, when money permits, contain brocade, likewise features that are exclusively reserved for women's clothing. Calling the front door 'the veil of the house' also illustrates an association of the house with the female body, which may also be protected by a veil against prying eyes. Combs-Schilling even goes as far as saying that the traditional Moroccan house is modeled on the female body.[10]

This is not to say that 'anything goes' for the women who meet within the intimate female privacy of a house. Depending on context, such relaxation can itself be highly stylised and imposes its own standards of behaviour.[11] This is especially the case in interaction with to non-related women, in whose presence family privacy must also be protected to a certain extent. Of these two competing forms of privacy, gender privacy prevails, so that among themselves, women feel free to dress, sit, laugh, and talk in a way that they cannot do in the presence of men.

In the eyes of women, gender privacy can be more dominant than family privacy. Even in his own house, a man can be an unwelcome intruder when his wife is receiving guests. While his definition of the situation is that of a private place where family privacy prevails, in the view of his wife, and much more so in that of her friends, gender privacy is disturbed and the setting is transformed from a private place into a public one. In such cases, women cut off their conversation, check their posture and clothing, and expect the man to withdraw as quickly as possible.

In situations where this is not possible, as in the case of a woman who had no choice but to invite me into the same one-room dwelling where her ill husband lay on a divan, the two genders are likely to ignore each other. In this particular

---

[10] " Even after gaining access to the initial opening, one is not yet within the main part of the household, but rather one must first follow a dark, circuitous hallway that finally breaks forth in the central courtyard - a place of great pleasure. The image is clear. Entry into the female is difficult, but if one gains access, then pleasures abound." E. Combs-Schilling (1989: 215).

[11] Cf. Moore, *Privacy*, 46, who maintains that escape into such a group is never a complete escape from social demands. While offering temporal escape from external pressures, intimate groups also serve to transmit and sustain different aspects of a society's culture. Therefore such groups develop their own standards of behaviour. That is one of the reasons for continuing individual ambivalence toward such groups, a tendency to retreat into an intimate protective group and then to escape from it.

case, my hostess had to leave the room to fetch water to make coffee. In much the same way as Europeans in an elevator may choose to ignore the other occupants, her husband and I kept silent and evaded each other's glances. His presence was even more openly disregarded by his daughter who came in and greeted me, saying: 'What bad manners does my mother have to leave you sitting here all by yourself!'

Even when there are no visitors women may feel ill at ease when adult male members of the family are present. They feel checked in their activities and are on their guard not to discuss certain matters, particularly topics concerning sexuality. Teenage girls love to dance or sing along with the radio, but when their father or an older brother enters the house they stop at once and may be ordered by their mother to turn off the radio altogether. There is of course considerable variation between families. In liberal families gender privacy is not seldom overruled by family privacy and family members of both genders feel rather comfortable in the presence of each other. The attitude of more traditional women concerning mixed-gender domestic situations can perhaps best be illustrated by quoting a Moroccan proverb according to which 'A man about the house is like a boil on the back', that is, a nuisance that prevents one from leaning back and relaxing.

In turn, men can also feel uncomfortable in complex domestic situations where their actions are limited by rules of avoidance. A fact that is often overlooked by westerners is that the seclusion of women not only limits the freedom of women but also circumscribes men's behaviour. In the family with whom I lived six months in Sidi Slimane, during the evening that my host was not out to a café to meet his friends he sat in the unheated garage to listen to his transistor radio by the light of a candle. Inside the house the female members of the family were comfortably watching the television in a heated and illuminated room. When a programme was being broadcasted that my hostess thought would interest her husband, she sent out her small daughter to fetch her father. Instead of joining us on the divan, he would sit down on a stool in the far corner of the room and leave again as soon as the programme was over.[12]

Asymmetries in Boundary Control

The discussion of Moroccan notions of privacy illustrates the point that a conception of sex segregation which relegates the activities of women to the 'private' sphere and those of men to the 'public' sphere is too simple. The

---

[12] Cf. P. Bourdieu, 'The Kabyle house or the world reversed'. 1979: 141, who describes for Kabyle society in Algeria how men are 'shut out' of the house in daytime and H. Geertz, In the essay 'The Meanings of Family Ties' in :C. Geertz, H. Geertz, L. Rosen, we are presented (1979:331) with descriptions of how men in Sefrou, Morocco, move with circumspection in their own neighbourhoods and homes.

dominant definition of a situation as private or public as well as the extent to which people are in a position to protect their privacy are dimensions of gender relations. For every social situation the question should be asked vis-à-vis whom amongst the participants experience of a particular setting as private or public is felt. In each case, this implies a process of negotiation between the different participants about their various interpretations of the situation.

The sexual division of Moroccan space is not symmetrical. Men have more space at their disposal than women, and it is easier for men to cross the boundaries of male and female domains than vice versa. The house is considered a female domain, and most men will respect the privacy of the female members of the family by spending much time out of doors. But sooner or later they have to come home to eat and sleep. Also, the house is the seat of the family privacy in which male members of the family participate and which is highly valued by them. Furthermore, as reference to the male head of the household as *mûl ad-dâr*, owner of the house, demonstrates, women are well aware of the fact that house rules are ultimately determined by their husband or the male relative with whom they live.[13]

From this point of view it becomes clear that there is more to the proverb 'A man about the house is like a boil on the back' than was alluded to above. A boil on the back is something beyond your control. You don't have a say in its coming on, and since it is on your back, you can't touch it. In the same vein, a man about the house may be a nuisance that prevents you from leaning back and relaxing, but there is not much you can do about it.

Men never need to ask for permission to enter their house. Women, by contrast, always need the authorisation of their husband or male caretaker to go out. To be sure, this does not mean that a woman has to ask for permission every single time she leaves the house. In practice, most women have negotiated a kind of 'passe-partout' or standing permission to visit specific places such as school, the mosque or the public bath, or to leave the house on particular occasions such as to visit a relative or a sick friend. They must, however, always be able to account for their extra-domestic activities, and permission to go out may be withdrawn at any time.

Also, the rules that determine who adjusts to whom when boundaries between male and female spheres are crossed point to asymmetry. The major step a man may take when he enters his home is to call out *camlû at-tarîq* 'clear the way'.[14] Subsequently the women inside adapt to the violation of their privacy by checking their clothing and conversation. Conversely, when women intrude into male domains like the street or the market, they take measures such as veiling, not

---

[13] The *Mudawanna* or Moroccan code of personal status follows Malikite law according to which it is a man's duty to provide maintenance for his wife, including a place to live. In return for her maintenance, the wife owes the husband her faithfulness and obedience. Cf. L. Buskens, *Islamitisch Recht en Familiebetrekkingen in Marokko. Aspecten van wet en werkelijkheid in de steden Rabat en Salé en het omliggende platteland*, Amsterdam: Bulaaq (forthcoming).

[14] F. Mernissi cited in Messina, *Celebrations of the body*, p.117.

lingering, or crossing the road to avoid walking past a café. Men make less adjustments to the presence of women in their domains than vice versa. Older and strict muslim men tend to avert their eyes, while young men not seldomly put the trespasser in her place with impertinent glances or remarks.

A form of cultural dominance of men can be observed in these negotiations about the private or public character of places. Women have less control over the boundaries of their private domains than men, and whenever different notions of privacy overlap, women accommodate most prominently. These spatial arrangements correspond to Moroccan notions of male and female corporeality. Men's legitimate penetration of women's private domains reminds one of men's penetration of women's private parts in sexual intercourse. In this way, cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity are embedded in the universals of human sexuality.[15] In the dominant world view, men are conceived of as bounded entities that are able to exert considerable self-control. This explains why men do not have to take measures when their domains are invaded; it is no threat to their integrity.

Women are considered to have 'open' bodies. Their boundaries are fluid and permeable. Correspondingly, they are thought to have less control over their bodies. Various practices can be observed in which female bodies are symbolically closed. To prevent premarital loss of virginity there are rituals in which girls step through a loom to 'close' their bodies. Also, women must always wear a belt around their waist and keep their hair tied together. Loose clothes or loose hair are associated with loose morals.

Similar relations between the sexual division of space and practices to 'close' the female body as a social measure to control the *Nafs* or passions of women has been documented for other Muslim societies in the Middle East. Delaney (1994:38) for example, discusses how according to Turkish villagers women must be socially covered under the mantle of a man and enclosed within his home, just as a field must be enclosed and 'covered' by ownership to reap its fruits. This is symbolised by wearing a headscarf. Women who do not wear a headscarf are considered open to the sexual advances of men. Boddy (1992:53) argues how the cultural definition of femininity in Northern Sudan is closely related to the notion of 'enclosure'. This is expressed in women's confined lives within the enclosure of residential compounds and the practice of infibulation, an extreme form of female circumcision that entails almost complete closing of the vulva. While

---

[15] Compare Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances* (1989:215) who writes about the mingling of such undeniable givens and cultural assumptions: "The fusion of the two [...] makes it difficult for the female to distance herself from the cultural definitions because they are written on and through her own body. To discard the definitions would be in some real way to damage her essential self [...] The embedding of cultural particulars in universal thoughts is one of the most powerful and durable means of reproduction that culture has available to it." On this last subject, also see P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*,1989.

85

women explain the significance of this practice in terms of protection of their fertility, men tend to emphasise the need to curb women's strong sexual desires.[16]

These examples appear to agree with the view that sexual divisions in the use of space generally correspond to different conceptions of the moral values of women and men. (cf. L. Sciama *The problem of privacy* 19:91) Like Boddy's, my material suggests that because men and women experience space differently they also have differentiated views on male and female moral virtues. My female informants do not acquiesce completely to this dominant view on the 'weakness' of women. In their view the sexual division in the use of space shape different forms of self-control in men and women. Because of the confined space within which they spend most of their lives, women claim to possess *sabr*, patience or endurance. Unlike men who seek distraction out of doors, women do not run away from their problems but develop the patience to come to terms with them. The salutary effect of *sabr* consists of all that strengthens the religious impulse and weakens the passionate one.(Cf.Ruska in *Encyclopedia of Islam* 1987:27) The kind of self-control that men develop more prominently is called *aql*, reason, the adroitness to negotiate successful transactions and act towards strangers according to the Moroccan code of conduct.(Cf. Eickelman 1989:181) Contrary to *sabr aql* is considered to develop as one acquires more autonomy and freedom of movement in the social world.

The Inviolate Privacy of the Public Bath

In the *hammâm*, different notions of privacy and female boundary control concur in a specific combination. Contrary to the house, where women's privacy may be intruded into by male members of the family, the public bath remains a female domain ideally at all times. In terms of gender privacy the public bath is the most private of female domains. The furious response of the bathing women in Halfaouine to the boy whose looks had betrayed him as a man must be understood in the light of various implications of his tresspassing had on female privacy.

With his 'seeing' eyes,[17] the boy violated the only domain over which women have absolute control, the only sphere of privacy that they can legitimately keep to themselves. In a way, the public bath is the ultimate 'circuit breaker'(Cf. Moore :12) for women, a private domain where a social overload, in this case family obligations, can be switched off temporarily. When a woman is out to meet friends, she is expected to come home if her husband sends for her or when she receives word that high status guests have arrived unexpectedly who must be attended to. But in the *hammâm*, a woman cannot be reached from the outside world. Whatever claim people want to put on her must be postponed until her

---

[16] Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, p.53.

[17] The mistress of the public bath allows women to bring along their sons until they begin *teyshûfû* or *teyᶜarfû* 'to see' or 'to know', meaning that they begin to view the naked female bodies with a sexual interest.

86

return home. The inaccessibility to outsiders of women in the public bath has even become proverbial; the attention of an absent-minded person with a far-away look is caught by teasingly commenting *mshât al-hammâm*, 'she is off to the public bath'. Not surprisingly, women are ready to defend vehemently the only place where they are temporarily immune to certain demanding obligations.

Losing temper is itself an expression of the relaxation of self-control that is allowed within the female privacy of the public bath. Most *hammâms* are open exclusively to women or to men. Other public baths have separate wings for men and women. Some public baths operate with alternating opening hours or days for men and women. The latter are less popular among women. One woman told me that she is hesitant about visiting a *hammâm* where the men's hours have just finished. She always makes sure that a considerable period of time has elapsed between the departure of the last men and her entrance. She would hate to be the first woman to enter the *hammâm* after it has been vacated by men. She would not feel completely at ease to enter a place almost naked that was occupied by men only shortly before.

My informant's sensitivity to the former presence of men in a public bath illustrates women's sense of bodily vulnerability. For many, the *hammâm* is the only place where, except for their underpants, they undress completely and expose their body and untied hair to others. As Messina describes in her account of the bathing protocol in the public baths in Fes, bathing in the public bath entails much physical contact, bodily intimacy and sensual attention. (Messina 1993:194). This kind of 'openness', of not being constantly on one's guard to protect one's bodily boundaries can exist only because women feel secure that their female privacy will not be violated. Therefore, I suspect that the commotion among the bathing women about the boy's glances also reflects anxiety about having their privacy intruded when most vulnerable.

Also, the presence of a boy who is on the brink of entering the men's world involves the risk of intimate information about women leaking out to male domains. In terms of family privacy, the *hammâm* is the most public of the socially recognised places for women. An additional reason for the turmoil among the bathing women in Halfaouine could well be fear that reputations may be harmed should gossip spread outside the family circle.

Privacy and the Public Bath at the Age of Modernity[18]

In terms of family privacy the public character of the *hammâm* enhances women's vulnerability. Nevertheless this public dimension of the public bath is an important reason for its popularity among women. It is one of the rare places where they

---

[18] For the purpose of this paper I use Bernal's definition of the term modernity: the process of incorporation into the nation-state and the capitalist world economy. Cf. V. Bernal 'Gender, Culture, and Capitalism: Women and the Remaking of Islamic "Tradition" in a Sudanese Village' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1994, vol 36 no. 1, pp. 36-67.

meet women who do not belong to their *qurâb* or 'close ones', that is, the circle of friends, relatives and neighbours with whom they interact on a daily basis. Here a woman is likely to pick up news that would not have reached her ears within the close surroundings of her '*dâr wa darb*', the house and the alley where she lives. In the public bath she has the opportunity to extend her personal network beyond the women in her immediate surroundings. The scars and tattoos on the nearly naked bodies of the bathing women tell details of their personal histories without words.[19] This creates an atmosphere of temporary intimacy that may encourage a woman to pour out her heart to any woman who happens to sit next to her. Sharing personal problems with a stranger who has no access to her own social network has the additional advantage that she does not have to be afraid that her confidentialities will leak out to her 'close ones' in the form of gossip that could have repercussions on her reputation. In this way, the weekly visit to the public bath serves as an 'escape' from the family privacy that envelopes women most of the other days in the week.(Cf. Moore 19:46)

Due to modernisation processes, the importance of the *hammâm* as meeting place is not the same for all women. Nowadays, the traditional housing architecture as was described above is only one of several types that can be found in Moroccan towns. Most high-income families have left the *mdîna* or old quarters of the town and moved to the *ville nouvelle,* the former French quarter. The European streetplan and architecture in the *ville nouvelle* look much like high-class suburbs in European cities. Whether they were built during the French occupation or at a more recent date, the lay-out of the modern villas consists of a living room, several bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. The villas are hidden from the view by trees and high surrounding walls. Most houses have pitched, inaccessible roofs. Where roofs are accessible, the distance between the houses is usually too large to allow conversation between neighbours. Except for passing cars, the broad asphalted avenues are almost completely deserted. Children do not play in the street but in their private gardens, and corner shops are rare. As a consequence, the hustle and bustle that is characteristic of the traditional quarters in the *mdîna* is lacking. Since even the distance between adjacent houses is relatively large and requires passing much open space, women do not easily leave the house for a chat with a neighbour or to run a small errand.

In general the inhabitants of the *ville nouvelles* are financially well-off, and many families have a *khaddâma* or domestic servant. They do the shopping and other chores outside the house, so that the mistress of the house can remain a *hâjba,* a secluded woman. *Hâjbas* only leave the house on special occasions, in which case they put on a face-veil and a *jallâba,* a long traditional overcoat. Even though nearly all houses in the *ville nouvelle* have a bathroom, most women make sure not to skip a weekly visit to the public bath. For many of them, this is the

[19] Tattooing is a form of traditional therapy to treat various illnesses such as infertility and spirit possession. Cf. M. Akhmisse (1985:87-8).

88

one of the rare occasions in their otherwise rather isolated lives when they can meet other women.[20]

The interaction between women in the *mdîna* is much more intense. Due to high unemployment and housing shortage, many of the traditional houses as described in the section on Moroccan notions of privacy are now shared by several families, each family occupying a different floor, or, in more dire circumstances, a different room. The central courtyard and the flat roof are shared between the families. To respect the family privacy of the other occupants of the house, men hardly come there, but the women are almost constantly in contact while preparing food on their little mobile charcoal- or gas burners, when doing the laundry near the water tap in the courtyard, or simply relaxing and enjoying the view from the roof in the afternoon. Only small alleys run between the rows of terraced houses so that from their position on the roof women can talk to their next door and opposite neighbours without leaving the house.

The alleys are full of playing children, while hardly a stranger passes by. Not surprisingly, the women in the *mdînas* often leave the house for a chat with a friend who lives a few houses away or to run a little errand at one of the many local shops. When they do not go beyond the immediate surroundings of their house, they do not bother to put on a *jallâba* or overcoat, but casually throw a bedsheet or tablecloth over their shoulders or head. Most of the lower and lower middle class families that live in the *mdîna* do not have the means to have a domestic servant. Shopping is therefore done by male members of the family or by women themselves. In general then, these women are much more mobile and less isolated than the women in the *ville nouvelles*. For them, a visit to the public bath is a welcome relaxation from the daily household-chores and a good opportunity to talk to women from other neighbourhoods.

As in many modernising third world countries, the need for cash and commodities has drawn large numbers people from the countryside to town looking for jobs. The *mdînas* have not been able to absorb the influx of new citizens, and *duwâr jadîd* or 'new villages' spontaneously grow everywhere around Moroccan towns. Like country dwellings, the houses in squatter areas consist of a courtyard with one or two rooms of equal size. Unlike residential patterns in the countryside, the houses are built in rows, forming small alleys that allow the same patterns of interaction between women as was described for the *mdîna*. Some of the oldest *duwâr jadîd* now enjoy municipal recognition and are connected to the electricity grid and waterworks. Most squatter areas, however, go without electricity or water. For the daily use of water, women send their children to the public tap to fill empty bottles. Larger quantities of water are needed for doing the laundry, and most women find it more convenient to go to the public tap for this task themselves to do their washing there. To feel more at ease at this public

---

[20] Cf. Messina who cites the Moroccan proverb according to which: "A woman only leaves the house to go to the *hammâm* and the cemetery." (Messina 1993:187).

place, they often arrange with neighbours and friends to go there together, so that the public tap has become a meeting place for groups of washing women.

There are no public baths in the squatter areas. The former country people who are living there are not accustomed to visiting the *hammâm* often, since this is typically an urban phenomenon. Nevertheless, adopting the custom of visiting the public bath is an important economic strategy for women from the squatter areas. For these 'newcomers' to town, the economic prospects within the market economy are low and many families depend on extra-market channels of economic and social help. Women from the squatter area therefore try to gain access to the networks of established women in town and seek to enter into patron-client relations with them.[21] One of the best places to meet townswomen is, of course, the public bath.

What I have tried to argue so far is that besides the attraction of absolute female privacy of the *hammâm*, women from different residential areas and economic backgrounds all have their own reasons for visiting the *hammâm* regularly. Although this may give a fair idea of the importance of the public bath in the lives of women in contemporary Morocco, it is not representative of all Moroccan women. Several categories of women no longer visit the public bath but prefer to bathe at home or visit the public showers.

In the last fifteen years, public showers, sometimes in combination with a *hammâm*, have begun to appear in larger Moroccan towns. In these public showers, people no longer sit in circles on the floor in one of three main rooms behind the buckets of water that they have filled from a communal tap or reservoir. The rooms in the public shower have separate compartments, each with one shower. Each person sits on her own bench in front of her own faucet. This arrangement allows much more individual privacy than the rooms in the public bath. When they first appeared, the public showers were almost exclusively visited by men, but in recent years, more and more women have begun visiting them. I was taken to them by a group of high school girls. They prefer going to the public shower because bathing there is much quicker. You don't have to wait to fill your bucket at the tap, and rinsing the body from the shower is less bothersome than continually having to pour small bowls of water over yourself. Another relatively new category of women composed of secretaries, teachers and other young women with busy jobs, likewise prefers the public shower because of its efficiency.

For quite a different reason, *al-khwatât* or Muslim sisters also show a preference of the public showers over the *hammâm*. Seeking a purer form of Islam, these women disapprove of what in their eyes is the public nudity of bathing women. According to Islamic prescriptions, Muslims should not expose their naked bodies to the eyes of people other than their spouse, and even then, the

---

[21] For analyses of such informal female networks for other categories of North African women see: V. Maher (1974) *Women and Property in Morocco. Their changing relation to the process of social stratification in the Middle Atlas* and W. Jansen (1987) *Women without Men. Gender and Marginality in an Algerian Town.*

genitals should ideally remain concealed.(Cf. Messina 1993:136). As mentioned earlier, most women in the *hammâm* keep their underpants on while bathing. Some, however, undress completely, covering their genitals with a hand or a washbowl when they traverse the rooms. The Muslim sisters are not the only ones who condemn this behaviour. When I asked women what they liked and disliked about the public bath, exposure to the genitals of other women was often mentioned as one of the drawbacks of bathing there, although few were prepared to avoid the public bath for this reason.

Another disadvantage mentioned by my informants was the lack of hygiene in the public bath. Especially in the public baths in the *ville nouvelle* a growing number of women can be observed who no longer sit directly on the floor. They bring a rubber mat or small wooden stool with them to sit on, thus avoiding contact with the dirty bathing water and the hairs that come off the women behind or next to them. Other women, especially those who have a taken on a European life-style give up visiting the public bath altogether.

To conclude, I would like to take up two points about shifts in the importance of the different notions of Moroccan privacy that I have described in this paper. First of all, it is interesting to note that living in a house that is designed and furnished in a European style which is characterised by a higher degree of space differentiation than traditional houses often goes hand in hand with a growing need for individual privacy and less emphasis on sharing, be it family privacy or gender privacy.[22] Amongst other things, this is expressed in an increasing 'instrumentation' to create more distance between the body and its environment. In the domestic sphere this includes sitting on chairs around a high dinner table rather than sitting on the floor around the *mîda* or small round table; the use of knives and forks and separate plates for the individual members of the family instead of eating by hand from a communal plate; and separate rooms with (single) beds for the children. In bathing practices this involves using devices that prevent direct contact with other bathing women such as rubber mats or wooden stools, or making a shift from visiting the *hammâm* to visiting the public showers where every woman has her own bench and her own faucet.

Secondly, the different categories of women who have stopped visiting the *hammâm* appear to have one thing in common: they tend to have more freedom of movement than the categories of women mentioned earlier. Moreover, this freedom of movement corresponds to several new meeting places for women. Teenage girls meet in school, Muslim sisters meet in the mosque and working women meet at their jobs. The female privacy of these meeting places is not as impenetrable as the public bath. I suspect, however, that the experience of operating outside the traditional female domains implied by their greater freedom

---

[22] I owe this argument partly to Messina's description of domestic spatial arrangements in the Moroccan city of Fes, although she does not make a clear distinction between family privacy and gender privacy. (Cf. Messina 1993:114;194).

of movement has developed a stronger sense of individualism in these women which may have diminished the importance of gender privacy for them.

References
Ardener S. 1981 (ed.) *Women and Space.Ground rules and Social Maps* London: Croom Helm
Akhmisse, M. 1985 *Médecine, Magie et Sorcellerie au Moroc* Casablanca: Benimed
Bernal,V. 1994 "Gender,Culture and Capitalism: Women and the remaking of Islamic 'Tradition' in a Sudanese Village" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol 36 no.1.
Boddy, J.1989 *Wombs and Alien Spirits* University of Wisconsin Press
Bourdieu,P.1979 *Algeria 1960* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
Buitelaar, M. 1993 *Fasting and Feasting in Morocco. Women's participation during Ramadan.* Oxford/Providence: Berg Publishers
Cammaert,M. 1985 *Migranten en thuisblijvers. De leefwerld van Marokkaanse Berberwrouwen* Assen:van Gorcum
Connerton, P. 1989 *How Societies Remember* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Combs-Schilling, 1989 *Sacred Performances. Oslam, Sexuality and Sacrifice.*
Delaney, C. 1991 *The Seed and the Soil. Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society* Berkely: University of California Press
New York: Columbia University Press
Elias,N. 1980 *Uber den prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen* (2 volumes) Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag
Encyclopedia of Islam 1987 vol. VII, Oxford, Oxford University Press
Eickelman,D.1989 *The Middle East. An Anthropological Approach,* Englewood and Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall
Geertz,C,Geertz H. and Rosen L.1979 *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society. Three Essays in Cultural Analysis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Jansen, W. 1987 *Women without Men. Gender and Marginality in an Algerian Town* Leiden: Brill
Messina,M. 1993 *Celebrations of the body. Female spirituality and corporeality in Muslim Morocco* Ann Arbor:UMI Dissertation Services
Moore, B. 1984 *Privacy. Studies in Social and Cultural History,* Armont, N.Y.:Sharpe,Inc.
Maher,V. 1974 *Women and property in Morocco. Their changing relation to the process of social stratification in the Middle Atlas,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
Nelson,C. 1974 "Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World" in *American Ethnologist* 1(3).
Rogers,S. 1975 "Female forms of power and the myth of male dominance: a model of female/male interaction in peasant society." in *American Ethnologist* 2

Rosaldo,M. & L. Lamphere 1974 *Women, Culture and Society* Stanford:Stanford
University Press

Female Dervishes in Contemporary Istanbul between Tradition and Modernity

C. Raudvere

Even in popular media, it is more and more recognised that groups and individuals associated with religious activities in the Muslim world cannot always be identified as part of 'the Islamist movement'. All Muslim activities are certainly not 'Islamist', on the contrary many Muslims react strongly against Islam's new visibility in society. Among religious organisations in Turkey, the various sufi orders play an important role. In what is a complex debate the participants take up very different positions and formulate very different strategies. Some of the sufis strongly oppose what they consider to be authoritarian attempts of manipulation. Therefore it is important to identify religious opposition against what is casually known as 'Islamism'. As Michael Meeker writes:"The resurgence of Islam in Turkey is better understood as a transformation, rather than a revival, of religiousity" (Meeker 1995:31).

This article is based on preliminary fieldwork among urban women in Istanbul, with a special emphasis on strategies used by women attached to sufi groups towards the Islamic presence in contemporary Turkish society.[1] As we shall see, young educated women have changed many formerly indisputable facts about secularism, religion and modernity. In the official republican discourse religious observance used to be associated with rural and small town people with little or no education. Today there is a multitude of religious strategies for women and numerous more or less formal organisations providing different outlooks on attitudes, ritual practices, dress etc.

Sufism is a very broad term, covering a wide range of different Muslim groups and activities, as well as theological and philosophical assumptions, over a long period of time.[2] It can generally be defined as the mystical traditions of Islam. A dervish is an initiated member of a sufi order, emphasise personal spiritual

[2] General surveys with further references: Schimmel 1975, Awn 1987, Baldick 1989.

94

development and the obligation to follow the instructions of their teacher, a sheik, who is also the spiritual leader of most prayers and ceremonies. Sufi groups, far from homogeneous, are found in all parts of the Muslim world and among immigrants in Europe and North America. Mostly these dervish orders are organised in formal, semi-public communities, but the ritual practices of sufism have also always been observed in private throughout history. Sufism has a long and complicated history beginning in the very first centuries of Islam.[3] The early Muslim mystics were to a great extent influenced by Christian ascetics in their mode of contemplation and devotion. The repetitive prayers developed into the principal ceremony of all sufi groups, and found legitimation in the Koran.[4] Via Eastern Christianity influences also came from Indian spirituality, such as meditation, breath control and the use of the rosary.[5] Most Western scholarly works concentrate on sufism as a theological system or as literary history, and only few address ritual practices among sufi groups.[6]The emphasis on doxa, normative and philosophical systems, and not least aesthetics, have formed an exceedingly idealised image of sufism as an attractive form of expression. Sufi conceptions have been transformed into Christian terminology in search of transhistorical similarities and eternal truths. Poetry and the world of art have in many ways formed the image of sufism as a more beautiful and acceptable form of Islam than the general idea of Muslim orthodoxy. Through the metaphors of wine drinking poets and beautiful women the image of the lustful Orient has been maintained. Sufism has been used by European artists and writers as a form of self definition, presenting themselves as outsiders, in opposition to narrow-minded bourgeois respectability, but not necessarily as Muslims.

The affluence of roses and nightingales in the orientalist studies of sufism has created a great distance between the normative discourse and 'life as lived'.

Sufi Women in History

It is hard to trace women of flesh and blood in sufi history, though some female saints appear in pious legends.[7] Most frequently 'Rabi^{c}a of Syria appears, and is often treated as a single historic person But according to Julian Baldick's convincing analysis it seems more likely that stories about two women, 'Rabi^{c}a of Basra and Rabi'a of Syria, have been amalgamated into one character in legendary history. Rabi'a is commonly referred to in the religious education of young women, not only in sufi contexts, as an ideal to follow. Her life is told in

[3]Baldick 1989: 13 ff.
[4]Chittick 1987.
[5]Baldick 1989: 23 ff.
[6] Some studies that emphasize rituals of specific sufi groups are Trimingham 1971; Gilsenam 1973 and Geels 1993.
[7]Baldick 1989: 29 ff.

pamphlets and popular booklets and she is especially renowned for her 'absolute devotion to the love of Allah', as I was told. The life of the saint can, it seems, easily be related to women's lives in the mega city of today. Some scholars have emphasised the way in which sufi philosophers of the Middle Ages use female imagery when constructing metaphors of the Divine, above all Ibn ᶜArabi (d.1240). From 'the golden age' of Persian and Turkish poetry a highly idealised imagery of women appears in poetry and pious literature; an image of the ideal female, rather than descriptions of women's lives.[8] The 'positive role' of women in sufi literature as stressed by Anne-Marie Schimmel is mainly an interpretation of literary sources, not analysis of lives of historical women. 'As mothers, many mystical inclined women have deeply influenced their sons who in turn became leading masters of the Path thanks to their early education.'[9] The contrast is very sharp between Anne-Mari Schimmel's literary study and Julian Bladick's historical approach. Her appendix 'The feminine element in sufism 'in *Mystical dimensions of Islam* (1975) refers only to idealised women in poetry or legendary history. Similarity and stability are stressed rather than difference and change, while Baldick does not hesitate to show how both theology and religious practice were reciprocally influenced.

It is undeniable that side by side with the exquisite poetry praising women of both beauty and spiritual qualifications many negative theological conceptions are associated with women. The influence on sufism from the gnostic aversion of the human body and the physical aspects of life led to many very negative statements about women in general. The use in sufi theology of negative philosophical terms, in different ways associated with femininity or women, emphasise this dichotomy .[10] Traditional sufi training, the 'path', aims at controlling human nature and man's given conditions: body and soul. It is a striving upwards away from what is considered material and therfore associated with the feminine. It has been pointed out many times that the soul on its lowest level was considered feminine, grammatically as well as philosophically.

Only brief notions in historical documents tell of female members who participate in prayers and other activities of the dervish orders.

---

[8] Emilie Olson and Kurtulus Öztopçu write in their discussion on how to evaluate and use the poetic sources as indications of sufi women's lives (1993:11):'the use of feminine imagery as a metaphor for God in the poetry of both Turkish and non-Turkish (Arabic and Persian) mystics may also suggest, on the one hand, that in contrast to more orthodox Muslims, Muslim mystics tended to have a more positive if sometimes idealised view of women in profane as well as in sacred realms. On the other hand, the mystical poets who do not refer to either males of females specifically may also reflect the general lack of differentiation which is characteristic of Sufi thought, leading them to use an androgynous or non-sexual model of human beings in relation to that which is sacred.
[9] Schimmel 1982: 145.
[10] Schimmel 1975: 112 ff; Watson 1994: 144 ff.

96

Turkish Islam and Secularism

Turkey differs in several ways from many other Muslim countries and the conflicts between various religious and more secular groups have a long history.[11] 'Islam in Turkey always was, and continues to be multi-dimensional' Richard Tapper writes in his introduction to *Islam in modern Turkey* (1991).[12]

Along with urbanisation and other changes within the social structures, modernist educational programmes from the 1920s onwards led to the situation in Turkey today where secularism, traditionalism, nationalism, and Islamism intermingle in ideological struggles at all levels of society. The Turkish political arena cannot be sufficiently described in right-left categories, since it involves harsh conflicts of social, ethnic and religious character.

Governmental religious politics of the last 70 years have been dominated by a programmatic secularism attempting to transform Turkey into a 'modern' European society. The reform ideology has its origins in the 19th century Ottoman *Tanzimat* movement and other attempts to introduce Western reforms, but at the time secularism to a large extent was met with reluctance.[13] At the beginning of this century the so-called Young Turks,took up these attempts of modernisation in their struggle against the old Ottoman rulers. Ever since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk gained power in 1923 after the fall of the Ottoman empire, systematic secularism has been on the agenda. His government initiated what is commonly known as 'the republican revolution': a series of radical changes, *devrimler*, 'revolutions' or 'turns'. Among the first measures taken were restrictions on the religious communities. All Muslim activities came under state control and became to a large extent mosque-centered, as pointed out by Richard and Nancy Tapper,[14] while other places for religious devotion were shut down.

A chain of changes involving radical transformations of Turkish society started with the abolition of the caliphate in 1924. The dervish orders were forbidden by legal restriction in 1925, although they have remained active underground ever since. The meeting places of the sufi orders, the *tekkis*, were closed, along with them the *medreses*, institutes of religious education, and welfare institutions of different kinds. All of them were dependent on the *vakifs*, foundations closely linked to the religious establishment and forbidden at the same time. Other places for gathering, like holy shrines of saints and great sheiks, *türbes*, popular destinations for pilgrimages, were also closed. The use of religious titles such as *sheik, efendi, baba* etc., and garments and other attributes associated with the sufi orders were prohibited. The consequence was, as Richard Tapper writes, that

[11]Toprak 1981, 1987, 1994; Mardin 1983, 1989, 1994; Baykan 1990; Kafadar 1992; Zürcher 1993; Markoff 1994; Sayarn 1994.
[12]R. Tapper 1991: 3.
[13]Ahmad 1993,Moghadam 1993:79ff, Zürcher 1993
[14]Tapper & Tapper 1987.

'Turkish Islam in effect became more standardised, circumscribed and compartmentalised.[15]

This large modernisation project run by the new leaders, with grand political ambitions, led to significant changes and many of them with an immediate effect on everyday life. As signs of modernisation, the alphabet was altered from Arabic to Latin scrips, the Gregorian calendar was introduced, and the use of family names. The symbolic value as well as the practical 'not only gave Turkey a more European image, but also made communication with the Western world much easier". as noted by Eric Zürcher.[16]

The tempo and intensity of the reforms were met with some reluctance and led to opposition and even violent uprisings.[17] After Atatürk's death in 1938, and even more so after the elections in 1950, when Adnan Menderes formed the government, the pressure on religious groups was reduced.[18] During this period 'religious courses were brought back into education, government support of the *Hajj* was restored, shrines were reopened and training for religious officials was restarted'.[19] But still, it must be remembered that education on all levels as well as all aspects of the official discourse was based on secularism and nationalism. Religion was not any obvious topic on the political agenda until the late 70ies.

Secularism and Nationalism

Turkish secularism was markedly nationalistic from the beginning. Ziya Gökalp (d. 1924), the ideologist of the Kemalist secularism, *layiklik*, formulated a patriotic national ideology in which the search for the pure, original, Turkish heritage was an important part. *Öztürk*, original and true Turkish, was one of the key terms.[20] The ancient Turkic nomads of Central Asia and the Anatolian peasants were highly idealised, despite the latter being the most devoted protectors of Muslim traditions. In the Kemalist discourse, modernity was identified with what was Western and European. Words like *oryantal* and *arabesk* were used, and still are, with strong pejorative associations, meaning both Eastern (Arabic) and an inclination to be backwards and anti-modern. What are thought of as ideals from pre-Islamic periods, democracy and equality between the sexes, were linked to the new ideals of modernism. Linguistic purism also belongs to this era, hailing Turkish as the mother of all tongues, with the result that popular culture was even more influenced by Arabic media: radio stations, films etc.[21]

[15]R. Tapper 1991: 2.
[16]Zürcher 1993:231ff.
[17]Yalman 1969.
[18]Zürcher 1993: 231 ff.
[19]R. Tapper 1991:9.
[20]Olson & Öztopçcu 1993: 2.
[21]Stokes 1992:89 ff: 1994.

98

As early as the Ottoman period a nationally defined religion was prevalent, a distinct Turkish form of Islam, in which sufi theology played an important part. Sufism is defined by the dervishes themselves as liberal and individual. These two aspects are united in a generally cherished assumption that genuinely Turkish traditions are maintained among the sufi orders. Among the contemporary orders, often in opposition against secular politics as well as Sunni orthodoxy, other alternatives for a pious life are at hand than those offered by the Islamic groups. The attitudes towards sufi orders are somewhat ambiguous. Despite legal restrictions and counteractions against them, they are highly regarded by people in general as preserves of genuinely Turkish traditions. Legends, stories of miracles, poetry, songs and instrumental music are known to be transmitted among the dervishes, particularly the poems of Yunus Emre (d. ca. 1321).[22] The consequences are a rather complicated situation where the dervishes are both oppressed and honoured. The Islamist universalism, therefore, stands in many religious and political questions in glaring contrast to Turkish nationalism. In individual lives, however, this is not always a conflict.

Secularism and Women in Turkey

The history of the women's movement in Turkey goes back to the 19th century and involves both religious and secular groups.[23] The Turkish mode of secularism also has a very special relation to women's issues. Education of women was one of the foremost targets of the Kemalist campaigns and served as an icon of modernity. Modern educated women were called 'the daughters of the revolution',a phrase still used off and on in conversation. Rapid changes were promoted by the Kemalist government and the secularisation process was encouraged, from the early 19th century and onwards. This created a divergence between different levels of education and tensions between rural and urban lifestyles: 'republican Turkey, a society that had been exposed to an élite-directed radical transformation of traditional values regarding women,' as Feride Acar writes.[24] The rural-urban tension has remained a basic theme in much writing on life in contemporary Turkey. However, the last twenty years rural life has mobed into the big cities, as much as the image of the 'city' and the modern world is presented through TV and other media in the countryside. Sharp divisions are not made that easy anymore.

[22]Schimmel 1975: 329 ff.
[23]Taskiran 1974; Ahmed 1982, 1984; Kandiyoti 1991a, 1991b.
[24]Acar 1991: 281.

The Halveti-Cerrahi order of Istanbul

A sufi order is called a *tariqa*, that is a path or road, hinting at the spiritual development offered members of the group. The principal ritual, the repetitive, intense *zikir*[25] prayer ('remembrance') is observed by almost all dervish orders. The term is used several times in the Koran[26], which has served as an important defence for the sufis against orthodox criticism of sufi piety as affected and sentimental.

Among the sufi orders in Turkey, the Halveti-Cerrahi has a unique position. It is the only one officially recognised, and goes by the name of a society for traditional Turkish music and folklore, *Türk tasavvuf musikisi ve folklorunu arasturma ve yasatma vakfi*.[27] The community is a branch of the Khalwatiyye and has a long history as an urban sufi order in Istanbul.[28] The dervishes meet three times a week at the *tekke*, the lodge of the *tariqa*, a place of devotion and social gathering. The *tekke* consists of several houses and looks rather small and insignificant from the street. At the entrance is the mausoleum, the *türbe*, with the founder's coffin and his imitators' coffins covered with green cloth. These holy men are shown tokens of veneration by the dervishes when entering or leaving the *tekke*. Pir Nurredin al-Cerrahi (d. 1721) founded the *tekke* in Karagümrük, where the dervishes still met, in 1704. Today, this is quite a run-down part of Istanbul, near Fatih, a district known among other citizens to be a centre for Islamists. To religious people it has a certain flavour of tradition and Muslim history.

Many of the orders' activities are focused on the founders, venerated at their mausolea. Genealogies and succession form a vital part of the oral history of the orders. Everyday events discussed among the dervishes are often referred to in connection with a legend from the life of the founder or one of the important sheiks and how God guides him through trouble and difficulties to harmony and order.

Both male and female dervishes are disciples, *mürids*, of the sheik, and are supposed to follow the ideal of training and developing themselves. Hierarchies among the dervishes form the basic infrastructure, with the sheik at the top. He is responsible for the dervishes' spiritual development, being the teacher of the community, and the leader of rituals, and through interpretation of dreams he gives individual guidance. Secrets are supposed to be revealed on the steps toward perfection. From the point of view of the dervishes, the hierarchies symbolise spiritual development and are shown by signs on their garments. The hierarchies of the past and the present exist in a way simultaneously: important persons of the past are present through story-telling and the teachings of the sheik and gives authority to his statements and decisions.

[25]*dhikr* in Arabic.
[26]10: 71; 21.48, 21: 105; 40: 54.
[27]Kissling 1953; Jong 1978; Martin 1972; Baldick 1989: 114.
[28]Jong 1965; Baldick 1989.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Halveit-Cerrahi order led a languishing life and only a few men kept up the *zikir* prayers in Karagümrük. For the past 15 years there has been a steadily increasing interest due to the charismatic sheik Muzafer Ozak (d. 1985) and the new Islamic appearance in Turkish society. These factors have rendered two new groups of members: Western converts, often familiar with meditation and new-age rituals, and many of them women; and also young Turkish people without family ties who enter the order. Ozak had a developed programme for his mission. Many of his books are translated into English and he went 'on tour' to the US and Europe to preach his message and perform public zikir ceremonies on stage with a group of dervishes. They represent the new *seriat*-orientation, closer to a stricter interpretation of Muslim ideals, while others are fascinated by the musical and poetic heritage among the Halveti-Cerrahis, an attraction that can be described in religious as well as nationalistic terms.

Rituals among the Halveti-Cerrahi Women

Evidently, there have been women of greater or less importance throughout sufi history, but hardly anything is known of how they practised their religion. How regular was their attendance at the *tekkes*? How frequent were their *zikir*-meetings at home? How were the hierarchies constructed among women compared to men? Many of these historical questions seem hard to answer, despite that the history of the order plays such a great role in the narrative traditions of the group.Todays female Halveti-Cerrahi dervishes cannot be said to conduct parallel activities; rather, I find the image of a Chinese doll more relevant. The male dervishes act on the fringe of a public arena, while the women's activities and rituals are even more hidden. Not on purpose, as far as I can see, but is just considered less important and less suited for public encounters.

From my observations I can distinguish three groups among the female Halveti-Cerrahi dervishes. The first is the elderly women who frequent the *tekke* as part of their family traditions. Many of them were born in the country side. The middle-aged women constitute the second and the smallest group. Like the elderly, their acquaintance with sufism springs from the family, and they are socially well integrated in the order. The third group, that of young women, is very heterogenous. It consists partly of not very well-educated women, often at home with small children. Like the older women they often come with other family members, and the better part of their social network is within the order. A new kind of member who have joined the order over the past few years are the well-educated young women, many of them professionals or university students. Membership is to them a personal choice, and they are fully aware of what the head-scarf and the long skirt symbolize in secular society. These often very well-spoken young women represent the new visibility of Islam, the movements and tendencies in Turkish society today. Their aspirations and aims - how they construct "tradition" differently for different purposes - indicate the complexity the conflicts that the Halveti-Cerrahi order confronts today. It is no longer a question

of secular vs religious matters; the religious discourse is certainly polyphonic. In many families it is a source of conflict between the generations.

This is so not only in the construction of meaning within the traditional frameworks of history and story telling: a new *seriat*-orientation is also present. This new generation of well-educated women has a positive outlook on religion, and plays an active part in society to a much greater extent than previous generations. With their different lives they will have new expectations and demands on the order in the future.

Every Thursday *zikir* is performed by the dervishes. During hours previous to the ceremony, about 75 women of all ages come slowly dropping in at the women's part of the *tekke*, and many more during Ramazan and other festivals. Some come very early for social reasons and sit and chat before the prayers start. They can reach the women's part of the *tekke* directly by way of a staircase on the outside of the main building without moving through the men's part at all. The upper floor has several rooms for social activities and meals, and doors to the gallery above the *büyük meydan*, the prayer room of the male dervishes. The Thursday meetings follow a set pattern: first evening prayer, then dinner with night prayer to follow, that turns into *wird* (a litany composed by Pir Cerrahi), and then finally the *zikir*-prayer that can last for several hours. During this intense ceremony some of the '99 beautiful names of God' are repeated for long intervals. As the tempo, the bodily movements and intensity of the *zikir* increases, the male dervishes rise and form a spiral, while moving in circles.

In the crescent-shaped gallery the women sit very close to each other in the crowded room, and it is almost impossible to move. It is very hot and dark. The women follow the *zikir* in the same way as the men do. But they cannot rise, or form any circles. Although I pointed out several times that I had no intention to convert, my interest in the group was interpreted as an indication of that I "had a good heart". I was always wellcome to attend the *zikir* prayers. With a scarf on my head I sat in the backrow of the women, but mostly I was urged to sit in the forntrow with a good view over the *büyük meydan*. It is questionable, however, to what extent the separation between the sexes should dominate an analysis when it is not emphasized by the participants themselves. The spatial distance between men and women is so conspicuous to a Westerner that it tends to become the fundamental category for descriptions and interpretations. When asked, women mostly answer that they perform *zikir* together with the men, but at different locations of the *tekke*. After a while distinct groups of women were recognisable for me. They had their set parts of the gallery and any trespass resulted in quarrels. Space was also marked by age (elder women in one corner), attitude to dress (from peasant style to sumptuous hijab) and different emotional intention in the participation of the *zikir* ceremony.

Not all women taking part in the *zikir* are initiated members, *dervisler*. From the neighbourhood women come more or less regularly to the various meetings at the *tekke*. It can be women with a general interest, but women on a pilgrimage to Pir Cerrahi's tomb are also rather frequent visitors. The latter are often members of some of the many Halveti sub-groups and come on organized bus tours.

Women's *zikir*-ceremonies

Once a month the women come together for a *zikir*-ceremony of their own. On these occasions no man is present at the *tekke*, and all duties are performed by women. It has been difficult for me to find out whether these gatherings are a recent phenomenon or not. Different persons give very different answers. A plausible assumption seems to be that the various kinds of meetings that Turkish women traditionally have held in their homes are now made into a public ritual, open to anyone who chooses to come. Domestic gatherings of a more or less religious character have been important arenas for women's religious practices.

These movements from domestic to more public arenas is most likely an impact of modernization processes in everyday life. In the suburbia of the modern metropolis it is no more possible to hold meetings restricted to family and friends. Other places than the traditional arenas open up for women's gatherings. The choice where to go and what leader to follow plays a crucial part in the construction of an urban Muslim identity.

The women's *zikir* at the Halveti-Cerrahi is led by two women appointed by the sheik. A fact of utmost importance for the women going across Istanbul on their own is that the meetings can be attended guarding their modesty. A room adjoining the gallery (not circular like the *büyük meydan*) is used for these meetings. Still, this room is so overcrowded that the women cannot rise and the women, to my knowledge,invariably perform *zikir* sitting down, even under more private conditions. However, the intensity is as ardent as on Thursdays. The prayer is accompanied by heavy bodily movements and fervent emotional expressions. The *zikir* starts gradually, reaches its climax and fades slowly away while the women sing *ilahiler*. Pieces of sugar and candy that have been placed close to the *zikir*-leaders during the ceremony are afterwards distributed among the participants. Bottles of water and garments from the sick are also collected after having received *baraka* from the *zikir*. Tea, snacks and sweets are shared in small groups, while some remain with the *zikir*-leaders and talk to them, maybe sharing some confidence. Others continue to sing *ilahiler* and yet others enter the rooms next to the prayer-room for a chat and some social activities.

The social importance that the order has for the members cannot be overestimated, bearing in mind the considerable increase of the population of Istanbul over the last 50 years and the almost uncontrolled growth of the major cities. In contemporary Istanbul most women of the Halveti-Cerrahi order are newcomers in a metropolis of more than 12 million people facing inflation, unemployment, housing shortage, and overcrowded flats. Many families are split because of work migration. The women experience a strong social identity with the group in Karagümrük, where they can form new bonds and relations. As Fulya Atacan has shown, the order offers male networks of economic contacts as well as being a basis for many other important relations, personal and professional. To a certain extent this is also true for women's religious activism. Affiliation to a specific group gives access to new arenas.

Head-scarfs and 'the new veiling'

'Why are women's heads the site of political and religious conflict?' Carol Delaney asks in an article on the social and political meanings of bodily hair.[29] And certainly *tesettür*, the proper covering of the body, has been a constant topic in the Turkish debate just as in most other Muslim countries.

The Kemalist laws of the 1920s never mentioned female dress as it regulated only the men's headgear. Still, the female headscarf (*basörtü*) has been regarded as either rural and backward or ostentatiously religious. Its reappearance on the public arena was to some elder secularists both a threat and an insult to the Kemalist ideals. Since the early 1980s, young women started to come to university campuses with covered heads, although the law prohibited religious clothing in official areas. These Islamist women put on new designs and outfits claiming them to be 'traditional'. None of these garments were used in pre-republican Turkey. Rather it is an invented tradition, globally used by women as a sign of Islamic consciousness. In Turkey Atatürk himself has for decades served as a model for secularist outfit: shaved, with business suit and tie,sometimes with a bowler hat, his portraits hanging on the wall of almost every official building and in many private homes.[30] His wife and daughters played the same role as public persons with their short European dresses and short uncovered hair. In the first decades of the republic the different modes of cloths were interpreted as indicating a struggle between urban and rural, between educated sophistication and ignorance. The Koran, the primary source of Muslim ideals, states that a true believer, man or woman, should be dressed in a modest way. What modesty, *edep*, implies has caused an intense debate.[31] Different Muslim groups have different answers as to what constitutes proper clothing.

'The veil' has for a long time served as a popular Western icon of the position of Muslim women. But it has also been emphasized that 'head scarves' and 'veils' can be interpreted as a revolt. 'Debates about the new veiling force all women to recognize that choice of dress is both a personal and political matter. It may be one of the few forms of political protest some women have', Helen Watson writes in a highly discerning article on the interplay between normative discourses on female dressing and local practices.[32] This is certainly true as long as this insight does not create other 'absolute images' of Muslim women in the media. It must be remembered that many Muslim women do not accept the Islamist specification of 'veiling' or *seriat*-discourse as the only relevant mode of guidance for their wardrobe or religious practice. In their interpretation of religion more covering of the body is not the equivalent of a higher grade of religiosity.

---

[29]Delaney 1994:168ff
[30]Meeker 1995:37f
[31]Olson 1985; Mandel 1989; Zürcher 1993:302ff; Delaney 1994; Ilyasolglu 1994; Watson 1994
[32]Watson 1994:157

A rich variety of Muslim dress can be observed in the streets of Istanbul, from the all-covering black cloaks (*çarsaf*) to what are considered to be country-style scarves, *basörtü*. The Arabic term *hijab* is sometimes used by radical Islamists referring to proper Muslim cloths for women. The different modes of the *tesettür* is a fashion in its own right. Shops specialized in modest clothing offer their customers different variations of monochrome full-length coats and matching head scarves in discreet patterns. Also, the all-white headscarf can be decorated in a number of ways: invowen patterns, beads, fringes or lace. Although spoken of as a 'uniform' by many secularists, the marks of individuality are unmistakable. The variations can easily be 'read' in the street or on campus as identification of adherence to particular groups and attitudes. In the academic world opinions are evidently divided whether the *tesettür* is a question of personal choice or an expression of a repressive ideology. The importance of outward signs and appearance is certainly not restricted to women. The way men handle their facial hair is equally interpretable. Being shaved and wearing a tie, like Atatürk did, is a clear sign of secular ideals, while the moustache is generally regarded as the 'traditional Turkish look'. A more strict and sober appearance with a well cut beard and a long-sleeved white shirt without a tie, but buttoned up, is rather common among men within various Islamist groups. The male dress has not created the same conflict nor hindered young men's entry to university or professional life. Whereas many well-educated women wearing *tesettür* feel discriminated and trapped between two sides on the labourmarket knowing most employers attitude towards the wearing of headscarves. When I asked aa young unemployed civil engineer whether she had tried religious manufacturers, she answered bitterly: They only hire men.

External appearance and clothing are very much in focus, not only in the general debate, but also among religious women themselves. Helen Watson stresses how varied the attitudes operating towards the appearance and movement of the body can be within a Muslim community.'Less attention has been given to the personal and political dimensions of hijab as both a required' form of dress and a personally chosen article of clothing.'[33]

Constructing Urban Muslim Identities

The women who perform *zikir* at the Halveti-Cerrahi *tekke* differ as much among themselves as religious women in general do in contemporary Istanbul. The image of Turkish Muslim women' has been deconstructed over the last years by second wave feminist and religious women likewise and no single prototype can represent the complexity of approaches. These processes have also encouraged women's religious activities and they have moved more into the public arenas from the private realm. 'The woman question' in the Islamist discourses is not any more a

[33]Watson 1994:143

negligible part of the media and the way the Islamist deal with the issue is challenges the secular establishment and are highly provocative to many loyal Kemalists. The members of the sufi orders certainly do not stand unaffected by the intense debate in the media.

Religious Turkish women relate in very different ways to the debate on Islam's influence on public matters. To some it is a question of degrees, while others, like some female dervishes, consider the Islamist claims to be fundamentally contradictory to their sufi ideology. The demands of Islamic influence on society are part of intricate global processes, but in Turkey also flavoured with a programmatic secularism and the imperial history of the country. Due to the Turkish educational system, secularism is the one background everybody can relate to, whichever position is taken in the debate on the relationship between the state and religious activities.

It seems likely that Turkish women, in the past as well as the present, form informal religious groups to a larger extent than men form informal religious groups, with meetings at home, votive prayers and vows at shrines and cemeteries. At Koca Mustafa Pasa Camii, where the saint Sümbül Efendi and his daughter Rahine are buried, a huge tree grows. This has been for long a place of special importance to women. The type of piety expressed here is of the kind Islamists as well as secularists condemn. Private prayer meetings are frequently and severely criticized by Islamists as a breeding ground for superstitious behaviour and un-Islamic tendencies in general.In Islamistic rhetoric women's gatherings beyond the control of local imams and mosque oriented hierarchies is often associated with uncontrolled sufi activities. From a secular point of view the sufi orders have the means of establishing invisible networks and thereby have a certain political influence. The presence of the sufi orders also blurs attempts at clearcut categorization of the present muslim discourse.

Women of the Halveti-Cerrahi order are part of a formal organization with long since developed rules of internal structure and rituals. The oral history of the community has always functioned as a way of interpreting the experiences and choices of the dervishes. Many women also take part in informal gatherings that seem to vary more than the restricted ritual life within the sufi order.

Being a young female dervish in contemporary Istanbul is to claim both tradition and modernity. The normative discourses founded in the Koran and in the *hadiths* offer transhistorical claims which are used to defend a variety of positions. However, in a rapidly changing social context - a steadily growing metropolis with social turbulence and political turmoil - interpretation of the holy texts are an absolute necessity to be able to construct an urban Muslim identity. The collapse of Kemalist modernism is highly visible in the postmodern city with its dissolved centre, its problems of uncontrolled settlements and pollution. In the midst of this are women's lives. Nevertheless, being a religious woman is not any longer equivalent to ignorance and powerlessness. It can certainly also mean resistance to authoritarian Islam.

References

Alcar, F. 1991. 'Women in the ideology of Islamic revivalism in Turkey' *Islam in modern Turkey*, R. Tapper (ed.), London.

Ahmed, F. 1993 *The Making of Modern Turkey* London

Ahmed, L.1982. 'Feminism and feminist movements in the Middle East, a preliminary exploration: Turkey, Egypt, and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen' in: *Women's studies international forum* vol. 5, p. 153-168, 1982.

Ahmed L. 1984. "Early feminist movements in the Middle East: Turkey and Egypt" in: *Muslim women* ed. Frieda Hussain, London.

Ahmed L. 1989. "Arab culture and writing women's bodies" *Feminist issues*, vol. 9, p. 41-51.

Arat, Y. 1990. "Islamic fundamentalism and women in Turkey" *The Muslim world*, vol. 80, p. 17-23.

Atacan, F. 1990. *Sosyal degisme ve tarikat Cerrahiler*, Istanbul.

Awn, P. 1987. 'Sufism' *Encyclopedia of religion* vol. 15, p. 104-123, M Eliade (ed.), Chicago.

Baldick, J. 1989. *Mystical Islam*, London.

Baykan, A. 1990. 'Politics, women and postmodernity' *Theories of modernity and postmodernity*, B S Turner (ed.), London.

Chittic W.C. 1987. 'Dhikr' *Encyclopedia of religion*, vol. 4, p. 341-44, New York.

Delaney, C. 1991. *The seed and the soil: Gender and cosmology in a Turkish village*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

Delaney, C. 1994. "Untangling the meanings of hair in Turkish society" *Anthropological quarterly*, vol. 67, p. 159-72.

Gardet, L. 1965. 'Dhikr' *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2 ed.), vol. 2, p. 223-27, Leiden.

Geels, A. 1993. 'A note on the psychology of dhikr' *The problem of ritual*, Tore Ahlbäck (ed.), p. 53-82, Åbo/Turku.

Gilsenan, M. 1973. *Saint and sufi in modern Egypt*, Oxford.

Ilyasoglu, A. 1994. *Örtülü kimlik*, Istanbul.

Jong, F. 1965. 'Khalwatiyya' *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2 ed.), vol. 4, p. 991-93, Leiden.

Kafadar, C. 1992. 'New visibility of sufism in Turkish studies and cultural life" *The dervish lodge: architecture, art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey*, R. Lifchez (ed.), Berkeley.

Kandiyoti, D. 1991. "End of empire: Islam, Nationalism and women in Turkey" in: *Women, Islam and the State*, Philadelphia.

Kissling, H.J. 1953. 'Aus der Geschichte des Chalvetijje-Ordens' *Zeitschrift der Deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 103, p. 233-89.

Mandel, R. 1989. 'Turkish headscarves and the foreigner problem'", *The new German critique*, vol. 46, p. 27-46.

Mardin, S. 1983. 'Religion and politics in modern Turkey' *Islam in the political process*, J.P. Piscatori (ed.), Cambridge.

Mardin, S. 1989. *Religion and social change in modern Turkey* (SUNY series in Near Eastern studies), Albany.

Mardin, S. 1994a. "Culture change and the intellectual" *Cultural transitions in the Middle East* (Social, economic, and political studies of the Middle East 68), S. Mardin (ed.), p. 189-213, Leiden.

Mardin, S. 1994b. Islam in mass society: Harmony versus polarization" *Politics in the Third Republic*, M. Heper & A. Evin (eds.), Boulder.

Markoff, I. 1994. "Popular culture, state ideology, and national identity in Turkey" *Cultural transitions in the Middle East* (Social, economic, and political studies of the Middle East:68), S. Mardin (ed.), p. 225-235, Leiden.

Martin, B.G. 1972. "A short history of the Khalvatiyya order of dervishes" *Scholars, saints and sufis*, N. Keddie (ed.), p. 275-305, Berkeley.

Mecker, M. 1995. "Oral culture, media culture, and the Islamic resurgence in Turkey" *Exploring the written*, E.P. Archetti (ed.), Oslo.

Nasr, S.H. 1987. *Traditional Islam in the modern world*, London.

Olson, E. 1985. "Muslim identity and secularism in contemporary Turkey: the headscarf dispute" *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 58, p. 161-171.

Olson, E. 1993. & K. Öztopçu. 'Images of women in the poetry of early Turkish mystics and the status of women in Turkish society' in: *Humanist and scholar: essays in honor of Andreas Tietze* ed. H.W. Lowry and D. Quataert. Istanbul and Washington 1993.

Sayari, S. 1994. 'Islam and international relations in Turkey' *Cultural transitions in the Middle East* (Social, economic, and political studies of the Middle East: 68), S. Mardin (ed.), p. 214-224, Leiden.

Schimmel, A. 1975. *Mystical dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill.

Schimmel, A. 1982. "Women in mystical islam" *Women's studies international forum*, vol. 5, p. 145-151.

Stokes, M. 1992. *The arabesk debate*, Oxford.

Toprak, B. 1981. *Islam and political development*, Leiden.

Toprak, B.1987. "Islamist intellectuals of the 1980s in Turkey" *Current Turkish thought*, vol. 62.

Toprak, B. 1994. "Women and fundamentalism: the case of Turkey" in: *Identity, politics and women*, V.M. Moghadam (ed.), Oxford.

Tapper, N. 1983. "Gender and religion in a Turkish town" *Women's religious experience*, P. Holden (ed.), London.

Tapper, N. 1985. "Changing wedding rituals in a Turkish town" *Journal of Turkish studies* , vol. 9, p. 305-13.

Tapper, N. 1990. 'Ziyaret: gender, movement and exchange in a Turkish community' *Muslim travellers*, D.F. Eickelman & J. Piscatory (eds.) p. 236-255, London.

Tapper, R. 1991. *Islam in modern Turkey*, R. Tapper (ed.), London.

Tapper, N. & Tapper,R. 1987a. The birth of the prophet: ritual and gender in Turkish Islam" *Man* (N.S.), vol. 22, p. 69-92.

Tapper N. & Tapper R. 1987b. Thank god we're secular!': aspects of fundamentalism in a Turkish town". *Studies in fundamentalism*, L. Caplan (ed.), London.

Tapper N. & Tapper R. 1991. "Religion, education and continuity in a provincial town" *Islam in modern Turkey*, R. Tapper (ed.), London.

Trimingham, J.S. 1971. *The sufi orders in Islam*, Oxford.

Watson, H. 1994. Women and the veil: personal responses to global process" in: *Islam, globalization and postmodernity* ed. by A.S. Ahmed and H. Donnan, London.

Yalman, N. 1969. "Islamic reform and the mystic tradition in eastern Turkey" *Arch. europ. social.* vol. 10, p. 41-60.

Zubaida, S 1995 "Ernest Gellner's sociology of Islam" *Economy and society* vol.24,p.151-88

Women and Mouridism in Senegal - The case of the Mam Diarra Bousso dahira in Mbacké

Eva Evers Rosander

Introduction

In Senegal one finds various forms of the current 'traditional','local' African Islam, comprising mainly Sufi Islam. There is also another orientation of Islam which is less 'traditional' and more 'global', an Islam more open to the universal Islamist tendencies and expressions of today. I refer to Islamisation as a kind of mediator between tradition and modernity in Senegal, being at the same time an interface and a dividing line between local and global and between traditional and reformist or radical. In this article, my main focus will be on women and Sufi Islam in Senegal. More precisely, I am interested in Mourid women, the Mouridiyya being the second largest *tariqa* (religious Sufi 'order' or 'brotherhood') in Senegal, and the Mourid women's associations. I have studied in particular one religious association, dedicated to the celebration of the mother of the founder of the Mouridism, the famous Sheikh Amadou Bamba. This association carries the name of the mother, Mam Diarra Bousso.The image of the mother as a pious person whose influence on her son results in his turning into a great saint is very important in the Sufism in general and perhaps even more so in its West African form. The mother figure is important in West Africa also outside the realm of Sufism and woman as mother has a position of authority which is not the case for women without children.

My interest in women's organizations in West Africa derives from a conference a few years ago with a group of Scandinavian and West African female social scientists. We called it 'Transformation of Female Identities: Women's Organizational Forms in West Africa'. The working title of my research project is 'Women's organizations as cultural expressions of female identity'. It is carried out in Mbacké, a town situated close to the Mourid's holy city of Touba. Mbacké was the town where Sheikh Amadou Bamba spent part of his life before he moved on to Touba,which since then became the centre of Mouridism. In my fieldwork I have been concentrating on the women members of the Mam Diarra Bousso association. Through participation in their meetings and visits to their homes I have tried to get an idea of their lives and ambitions and engagement in the association. Together we made the pilgrimage to Porokhane to celebrate the less formal, religious association. I call this form of association 'informal' as it has no links whatsoever with the state or with state related regional institutions. Even if

110

there exists an elected president and a cashier, one or several secretaries and someone who keeps the accounts for the money collected from the members, there are no membership lists or any form of registration. To cease being a member does not require any formalities; one just stops going to the meetings.

Generally speaking, women's informal associations in Senegal not only provide a collective basis for action - they also express and consolidate women's cultural identities. In Senegalese society everybody strives to get integrated into the group. Nobody wants or can stay alone, without belonging to one or more groups. To be alone is to be 'outside', isolated, and that is something which only mad people do. One's life has to be transparent (Wolof:*leer*) and well known to the social surrounding. This is one's social and moral obligation. Everything has to be done in common as if to underline one's honesty: meals, work, entertainment. The associations offer the proper framework and the legitimate form for togetherness. *Aide-entre aid* (self help) is important for all kinds of social activities and ceremonies.This means collaboration with others on a reciprocal basis. To realize oneself fully as an individual, one needs a group, a collective.

Religious and ritual associations draw upon higher authority. To better explain what I mean I will cite Kathryn March in her article about women's associations and development: 'The religious associations cast women's actions within a culturally meaningful frame, cloaking women's associations with an aura of spirituality, inspired authority and orienting the place of gender in the wider world order '(1982:78). This will be my perspective in the following in my use of the Mam Diarra Bousso association as a case for analyzing women's position in the local community as well as for making some tentative generalizations about their place in the wider society.

In a similar way, some religious institutions and rituals will be discussed from the point of view of gender ideology and practice. To clarify these issues they will be divided into questions about religious *authority* and the relations between those who have and those who do not have access to religious power. The nature of *leadership* and member *participation* in the religious associations are also matters of concern. The participation of the members is often motivated by both self-assertiveness and self-protection as part of women's informal strategies. The focus easily becomes directed towards the distribution of material and immaterial resources. One important resource is information. The associations are informally structured around female communication networks which also stretch into male domains of power and authority. Another is the moral reputation of the women leaders and members of the associations, reputations which can sometimes be more or less successfully manipulated by the women. This leads us to reflect on female and male ideas about Mourid gender ideals. Mam Diarra Bousso is one such female religious ideal person, whose life is told again and again in the form of legends by the Mourids as an example of the ideal wife and mother whose behaviour was characterized by *mun* (patience) and *soutura* (loyalty, stoicism, ability to keep family secrets).

Some Analytical Concepts

There are three key words or concepts, namely *purity, religious education* and *religious blessing*, which are intimately linked to men's and women's different positions in the religious institutions and rituals. Those key concepts in the male-dominated Islamic discourse are often brought up in Senegal by the Sufi marabouts as well as by the Islamists. They can be said to be *paroles d'honneur* of the Senegalese Islamic revival. And they affect women's participation in the Mouridism, as Sufism and Islamism are partly interacting and influencing each other in contemporary Senegalese society.

Perhaps birth is the factor of most importance for the position of women in the Senegalese society. 'Caste',[1] religion, ethnicity, descent from the great maraboutic lineages - all this gives ascribed status or lack of ascribed status to women, as well as to men, of course. However, compared to women, there seems to be more transactional space for men's social careers; they are more mobile and unconventional. The male status seems to be more easily achieved and transformed in other, alternative and overlapping ways, like for example in migration. Women's role as moral icons of the society prevents them from getting recognition for certain more innovative forms of status changes. In relation to *baraka*, descent is decisive for both men and women, as we shall see. But again, women have the disadvantage of getting much less societal recognition for the blessing *baraka* they may have inherited from their maraboutic lineage through descent, although they may be *sokhnas*, i.e. of maraboutic descent. In short, women give and take/receive less *baraka* than men. This contributes to their marginalisation in public life in relation to the men, whose ideas about themselves and the women dominate and monopolize the gender ideology and its religious as well as its secular practice.

By purity (Arab.*tahara*) is meant ritual purity, required of those who approach God through prayers, reading of the Koran, and entering holy spaces like mosques. These people are men, as women who menstruate and give birth are impure during the bleeding periods. The blood is considered defiling. This physical fact predestines women to a second-rated position within the Muslim gender hierarchy, as a woman cannot control her bleeding and thus cannot avoid being periodically 'unclean'. This limits her participation in the rituals and gives her a low ranking compared with men.

Religious education and knowledge has always been an important criterion for being a good Muslim. Knowing Arabic well enough to be able to read the *Hadith* and knowing prayers and at least parts of the Koran by heart are current examples of what defines true believers of Islam. *Jahaliyya,* religious ignorance, is now becoming a negatively loaded moral concept, signifying not only as it did originally the lack of Islamic knowledge which characterized strangers living outside the Arab region. Added to this, today the concept has connotations of heresy or even denigration of Muslim values. Religious education for both girls

---

[1] Hierarchically ranked ascribed status groups, based on professions.

and boys is today on the Islamists' agenda all over the Muslim world. This is not necessarily so, however, among the Sufi leaders. It is true that knowledge of Arabic, being the religious language, is prestigious and increasingly winning ground also among the Sufis. But the Mourids still consider their religious identity as closely linked to Wolof (ethnic) identity and to the use of the Wolof language. Poor families, and particularly the girls and women of poor families, remain illiterate and ignorant, something which contributes to their subordinated position in relation to men in religion.

Religious blessing (Wolof *barke*, Arab *baraka*) is a comparatively unique male quality, linked to male descent through the maraboutic lineages. Concerning the religious blessing, women from maraboutic families do inherit *baraka*, like men, but to a lesser extent, and they have access to it and get recognition for it on negotiable and highly varying conditions. Personality is probably more important than descent for the recognition of female *baraka*. The transfer of blessing through men is a phenomenon whose importance cannot be sufficiently stressed when criteria for religious authority, for example, are discussed in a Sufi context. The marabout's crucial role in a *tariqa* is intimately connected with his ability to give *baraka* to his disciples. In relation to this, the importance of *tiaba* , religious merit, for women should not be neglected. The work they do and the money they offer to their marabouts give them religious merit, which is perceived as something being directly rewarded them by God. Men as well women get *tiaba* for their pious acts, of course, but women seem to be more in search of it than men, as their possibilities of getting *baraka* through the mediation of the marabouts are comparatively more limited. (cf. Buitelaar 1994)

The main purpose of this article is to show how the mentioned concepts regulate female religious practice in the Mouridism of today. First, I will present the Mourid brotherhood in short traits. Then follows an account of the Mourid gender ideals as manifested in the legends about Mam Diarra Bousso and in the Mourids daily life. Mourid institutions such as the *dara* and the *dahira*[2] will be introduced, and the Mam Diarra Bousso *dahira* described in some detail. In the final analysis of the Mam Diarra Bousso *dahira*, women's practice is not only seen as linked to the dominant religious ideas and concepts but also interpreted in terms of women's ability to manipulate the value system without challenging it.

---

[2] Villalón describes in his book on Islamic society and state power what he calls 'a unique case in Fatick of an all-women's daira which claims no affiliation with any other order.' (L.A. Villalón (1995), Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal: Disciples and Citizens in Fatick, Cambridge p.162). In New York among the female Murid immigrants there exist Mam Diarra bousso dairas for women only. So it seems realistic that one should find several 'unique cases' of female religious associations of different kinds but built on the maraboutic system as a whole.

The Mourid Brotherhood

The *Mouridiyya* is an Islamic brotherhood of great political, economic and social significance in Senegal. Even if the brotherhood is not the biggest one in terms of number of disciples, it has many characteristics which are usually considered as typical for the Senegalese form of Islam and Islamic mysticism or Sufism. The biggest brotherhood in Senegal is the Tijaniyya; another important one is the Quadiriyya.

The mourids are effectively organized in a country-wide federation with its administrative and religious centre in Touba. The most eminent group of the leaders belong to the same lineage as the founder or are allied to him through marital alliances. The fact that the leadership is well organized gives the dominating Mourid leaders a power position in Senegal, which the other brotherhoods partly lack. This power derives to a great extent from the Mourid's active participation in the economic life of the country and their indirect link to the Senegalese state. The religious ideology encourages economic activities. Resources from the marabouts' disciples in the form of agricultural work on maraboutic properties- above all the peanut cultivations- or cash from the urban religious associations pour in to the great religious leaders. Their political power is considerable, as the Mourid leader in Touba can mobilize the masses of the people through proclaiming an order (*ndigeul*) to his disciples to vote in favour of the candidate preferred by him.

In the Mourid brotherhood the leader who followed after Sheikh Amadou Bamba (1850-1927), is called *khalifa general*. He is recruited patrilineally. The present *khalifa general* is one of the two remaining sons of the founder. When they die, the grandsons of the founder will be eligible. Other descendants of the founder, who have his name (Mbacké) or the name of his mother (Bousso), i.e. related to Sheikh Amadou Bamba both matri- and patrilineally also become sheikhs or *sokhnas* (there is just one daughter still alive) and have their own disciples by right, called *talibés*. They are about ten in number and constitute *les grands marabouts*. Ranked as of lower status in the Mourid hierarchy are the *petits marabouts* who are greater in number and more remotely related to the Mbacké family. (Magassouba 1985:31) The base of the hierarchical pyramid consists of the Mourid disciples, whose obligations are to show deference and obedience to the sheikh or the *khalifa* to whom they are attached. The Mourid brotherhood distinguishes itself by a total subordination of the disciple to his leader. This is expressed through the disciple giving his promise of obedience to the sheikh or, as he is often called in the francophone literature, the marabout. The link between *talibé* and sheikh is basic for the existence and functioning of the brotherhood. It cuts through family ties and ethnic and regional belonging. Furthermore, it is considered to be a masculine relation: women cannot maintain such a link with a religious leader except under very special conditions (see below), as women are not allowed to pronounce the vow of obedience (wolof:*njebelu*) to the sheikh. The sheikh's *baraka* (wolof: *barke*) will strengthen and help the disciple in his life on earth. Through the mediation of the marabout

114

and his holiness, the disciple hopes to gain access to an eternal life in paradise. The link to the marabout also works as a kind of social security net for the disciple, who will, for example, be able to count on his sheikh's support for marrying his children and for paying the costs in relation to that.

The founder, Sheikh Amadou Bamba, stressed the importance of the male disciple's unconditional work duty for his marabout, whenever the latter demanded it from his *talibé*. The Mourid emphasis on work as a religious duty was not given any thorough theological explanation by the founder. It remains clear, however, that the stress on work refers to work for one's marabout; it does not refer to being industrious as a general virtue. Already in sheikh Amadou Bamba's time agricultural work could replace religious education for the rural disciple. In this respect Mouridism differs from the Tijani brotherhood, which pays greater attention to religious formation and to education. Mouridism was and is associated with the rural areas of Senegal and with the ethnic group of wolof, although there are many exceptions to this. The Mourid language is wolof; French is not considered proper to use.The Mourid brotherhood is effectively organized in a country-wide federation with its administrative and religious center in Touba. The most eminent group of leaders belong to the same lineage as the founder or are allied to him by marriage. The fact that the leadership is well organized gives the dominant Mourid leaders a power position in Senegal, which the other brotherhoods partly lack. This power derives to a great extent from the Mourids' active participation in the economic life of the country and their indirect links to the Senegalese state. Their religious ideology encourages economic activities. Resources from the marabouts' disciples in the form of agricultural work on maraboutic properties - above all the cultivations of peanuts - or cash from the urban religious associations pour in to the religious leaders. Their political power is considerable, as the Mourid khalifa general in Touba can mobilize the masses of the people through proclaiming an order (*ndigeul*) to his disciples to vote in favour of the candidate preferred by him.

The Ideal Wife and Mother: Mam Diarra Bousso

The Senegalese gender relations seem to be both conflicting and contradictory, partly interacting, partly clashing with each other in every day life. Two discourses distinguish themselves particularly among many others concerning male - female relations in Senegal. Gender relations seem to be both conflicting and contradictory, partly interacting and partly clashing with each other in every day life. The Islamic discourse underlines a perception of women as subdued and patient beings, while the 'African' discourse stresses motherhood, the mother having a strong, powerful as well as a loving and caring personality. As a mother she is of the greatest significance for the well-being of the children. Particularly as a Wolof mother, she is considered to predestine her children to success or failure in life through her own moral behaviour. (see below) Following the Sufi

tradition the pious mother is seen as the ideal fosterer of the Sufi saint. Thus, she is considered to have a great influence on her children's spiritual development,

The mythical mother image of Mam Diarra Bousso, the mother of Sheikh Amadou Bamba, fulfills both the Wolof and the Sufi ideal expectations. She is frequently referred to in Mourid women's conversations as an example for all women to follow. Through the numerous legends about her life and behaviour, which are transmitted orally from one generation to the next, she occupies a central place in the Mourid moral universe. Her popularity is immense, not the least because of her strong mystical potentials. The women say that Mam Diarra Bousso gives to them what they ask for within a year. She assists afflicted people who come to her *khabru* (tomb) in Porokhane asking for her help more rapidly than even her proper, much more famous son, Sheikh Amadou Bamba, whose tomb in Touba is visited by over a million people each July on the biggest of all the Mourid magals.[3] According to the legends, Mam Diarra Bousso's characteristics as a wife coincide with those of the ideal Mourid and Wolof woman. She is patient (Wolof: *mun*), she endures without complaint whatever hardships and injustices that her husband may exposes her to and she finds proper means of providing for her husband and children in hidden ways, not blaming him or making him embarrassed for not being able to support his family. The main concept is *soutura*, to have or to show *soutura*. The word has an Arab origin, indicating a veil or a piece of cloth which is used to hide something, like a kind of wall. In this case it is mostly the misdeeds or bad luck of the husband which should be hidden. The wife is expected to conceal unpleasant secrets about her family life and to appear stoically and bravely as a happy wife without problems, which, if exposed publicly, would have resulted in the husband losing face in front of others. (cf. Ly:252-264).

These ideal female characteristics are vividly illustrated in the legends, which are known among most Mourid women, constituting a female oral tradition. One of them tells about Mam Diarra Bousso's unselfish way of financing the family's expenses for food when her husband was not able to provide his expected share. The good-hearted woman went without complaints or reproaches with her necklace to one of the *peuls* (nomad) who lived outside the village to buy milk and millet for the husband, the co-wives and the children, each day paying with a pearl. When Mam Diarra's mother came to visit her, the old woman asked for the necklace. Not until then did the daughter tell her mother what she had used the necklace for. Her mother was impressed by the good behaviour of Mam Diarra and bought all the pearls back as a gift to her daughter. This is a really pedagogic example of *soutura* shame, willingness to conceal a truth protecting the husband from the blame of others for his inability to provide for his family.

Another popular legend shows the extraordinary patience, *mun*, of Mam Diarra and the total submission she showed to her husband. One evening the husband

---

[3] The date for the magal differs a little from one year to another which makes it possible to chose a Thursday.

116

wanted to go outside the homestead to do his ablutions and Mam Diarra accompanied him to open the gate. On his way back he never told her to close the gate and join him to sleep. Instead he forgot about her and went to rest, while Mam Diarra spent all the night at the gate, the rain pouring down on her waiting for her husband to call her. Not until early the following morning did he call for her and asked her where she had been. When she told him he was astonished over her patience, obedience and strength to endure hardships.

As a mother, her qualities are also expressed in terms of honesty and transparency (*leer*). The general idea is that the fate of the child is strictly dependent on his/her mother's (moral) behaviour. This places a heavy burden on the mother, who will alone be made responsible for her children's actions, their successes as well as their failures in life. On the other hand, the father's good or bad influence on his children in accordance with his own manners as a family member is reduced to none. Here descent is not mentioned in relation to female behaviour, but morality, and women's social responsibilities, which seem to be much greater than men's. Motherhood really means something, and Mam Diarra Bousso has to be given thanks and glory for raising a son like Sheikh Amadou Bamba. It is thanks to her own stainless moral life, her patience and ability to endure personal sufferings that Mouridism has got such an extraordinary founder and religious leader as Sheikh Amadou Bamba.

This is eloquently expressed in one of the legends in the following way: The little baby learnt miraculously early to talk. He was just a few years old when he told his mother in confidence that he was a saint, a prophet, and that it was because of her that he had got this power. It was due to her submission and obedience to her parents but most of all to her husband his father, that she had got a son like him. 'You are worth it and I will never be anybody else's but yours and only yours', said the baby boy who was to become the great Sheikh Amadou Bamba to Mam Diarra Bousso.

Male and Female Mourids

The ideal male Mourid dedicates his physical strength, time and labour to serving his spiritual leader without complaint. To submit, to obey orders, to be good, peaceful and hospital are all male Mourid virtues. Women seem to be almost invisible in such religious structures as brotherhoods of the kind here described. They have no other task than to provide food to the men working in the maraboutic fields or to prepare food for the religious feasts. As they are not supposed to make the vow of obedience and subjection to the sheikh, they cannot be considered to be proper Mourid *talibés*. Besides, the women should have the same relation to their husbands as the husbands have with their marabouts, i.e. a relation characterized by submission and obedience. This is how women have been pictured in some of the literature on the Mouridism, probably reflecting the opinions of the social and political scientists' own male informants (O'Brien 1971,

117

Copans 1980, Creevey 1992). However,this is certainly not the female Mourid's point of view.

When women are asked about how they perceive themselves as Mourids, the women state that they are the followers of a certain Mourid sheikh because of their membership in a particular *dahira* (religious association) which venerates him or the *khalifa general* in Touba. They say they often have the same sheikh as their husband and if not, they have the same as their fathers. Membership in the religious associations make them feel themselves to be active participants in the brotherhood.

It is true that the women cannot become *imams* (religious teachers at the mosque) just as they cannot, according to prevailing norms, be religious leaders, have disciples, give vows of obedience to their marabout and sing the *khasaid*, the religious songs written by sheikh Amadou Bamba, containing citations from the Koran. However, exceptions from these prohibitions can easily be found in Senegalese religious practice. To avoid misunderstandings, however, we have to distinguish between 'ordinary' female Mourid *dahira* members and wives and daughters of eminent religious leaders, the latter being called *sokhnas*. What is possible for these women, who belong to famous and powerful maraboutic families, is impossible for the great majority of Mourid women. The ideological reasons presented by the Mourid men fall back on the Islamic gender ideas about women as being ritually impure and moreover ignorant, lacking religious education.

One example of a *sokhna* with exceptional power and influence is *Sokhna* Magot Diop who inherited her *barke* from her father *Serigne* (title awarded the great male marabouts) Abdoulaye Niakhep. Already as a child she was chosen by her father who did not have any son, to become his successor because of her charismatic personality. She lives in close contact with the *khalifa general* in Touba. Even if she is a woman she has given him her vow of obedience like her father decided and nobody opposed the decision. *Sokhna* Magot Diop has considerable political power in the Thies region where she lives. Thus, this female marabout has her own male and female *talibés* (Coulon 1988; Coulon and Reveyrand 1990).

It is also true that the 'ordinary' Mourid women from non-maraboutic families offer their religious leaders their ability to make food and in connection with this their time, labour, and, not least, their money. They also provide sexual services and reproductive capacity in the maraboutic polygynous marriages. Young girls are given as brides to the sheikhs by their father's talibés. These marriages often take place without legal marriage contracts, which means without any possibility of getting a legal divorce. Not until a marabout 'frees' his wife by telling her that she can leave is the marriage canceled. One often cited example of a *sokhna* (daughter of a famous sheikh) with exceptional power and influence is *Sokhna* Magot Diop, who inherited her *barke* from her father Serigne (a title awarded the great male marabouts) Abdoulaye Niakhep. Already as a child she was chosen by her father, who did not have any surviving sons, to become his successor because of her charismatic personality. She lives in close contact with the khalifa generale

118

in Touba. Even though she is a woman she has given him her vow of obedience. Her father decided that this should be done and nobody opposed. *Sokhna* Magot Diop has considerable political power in the Thies region, where she lives, because of her disciples' loyalty and her many influential connections. Thus, this female marabout has her own male and female *talibés* (Coulon 1988; Coulon and Reveyrand 1990).

The *dara*

The Mourid *dara* is connected with the rural areas and their Mourid population. The word itself has Arabic origin (*dar*:house) and was before the rise of the Mouridism the name of the place of religious education, primarily Koran studies. In the first phase of Mouridism the *dara* was an effective instrument of the Mourid sheikhs' colonization of the rural areas of Kaolack, Thies and Diourbel.The disciples of the great marabouts cleared the land and cultivated large quantities of peanuts on the maraboutic fields. Today the most frequent form of *dara* combines agricultural work and religious education for the sons of the Mourid farmers, who live in villages 'owned' or controlled by the sheikhs. There is certainly social pressure on the farmers to send their sons to the *daras*, as well as to contribute with their own labour in the maraboutic 'Wednesday field' once a week. Many of the Mourid farmers came to the maraboutic villages as landless peasants, receiving their fields from the hands of their sheikhs. Others got their land from the marabout or his father after having spent some years themselves in the dara. There exists a female equivalent to the *dara* for the daughters of the disciples' families. The wife/wives (the 3) of the marabout receive/s small girls from the age of four/five who are given by their mothers to the marboutic household to live with the *sokhna* to work for her and to be educated by her as a sign of their loyalty to and confidence in her. The daughters are given the mane of the *sokhna* by their parents who honour her by this tradition. In these female maraboutic collectives the girls grow up in larger groups without any close contact with their mother. She comes and visits only on certain occasions, like the religious feast and after childbirth. The mother stoically avoids showing too much tenderness towards her own daughter on these rare occasions, not to make the departure too difficult and painful for the daughter. The girls stay with the marabout's wife until they become married. It is the *sokhna* who chooses a husband for the girl and helps her with the cost of the wedding and its organization.

The *dahira*

Dahiras are mostly associated with urban forms of Mouridism. Currently, however, not only *daras* and 'Wednesday field' work but also *dahiras* are found in the Mourid countryside. The popularity of the *dahiras* grew in parallel with the urban migration, which started to assume considerable proportions in the 1950s.

119

They originated in the immigrating Mourids' need for an instrument in town by which people could regroup themselves according to the criteria prevalent in the city without loosing their identity as Mourids, even if they were living far from their marabout. The *dahiras,* which, as mentioned above, constitute religious organizations devoted to a certain marabout or to the khalifa general himself, have an important task in urban political as well as religious life. *Dahiras* offer a visible and concrete measure of the influence and fame of a particular sheikh - he is needed by his disciples because of his *baraka,* but he certainly also needs his *talibés* to manifest, confirm and maintain his power position in relation to other sheikhs - and he needs the financial contribution from the *dahira* members (Coumba Diop 1981). Members of the *dahiras* are mostly sons, daughters and grandchildren of urban migrants. The organizations are divided according to age and to a certain extent according to sex men and women sit separately although in the same room. In these *dahiras* where both men and women are members, men tend to control the important posts while women have a parallel structure for formal representation. Thus, there is a women's president and a men's president of the same *dahira.* Women certainly have a great del to say in the *dahira's* operations, even if the Senegalese society including the *dahiras,* is characterized by its stratified social structure and hierarchical norms (cf Villalón 1995:162).

Some *dahiras* are based on the members having a common profession, others on common geographical origin, others have members who suffer from the same handicap - for example being blind. Other *dahira* members have nothing else in common than the marabout. Different ethnic groups, 'castes' and 'non-caste' people and immigrants from different regions of Senegal may be found among the members in one and the same *dahira* in Dakar or in any other city. In the rural village all the dahira members come from the same section of the village, belonging to the same marabout, who usually lives nearby. At the weekly meetings, religious songs are sung, issues related to the activities of the *dahira* are discussed and the weekly sums of money are collected. These sums - the so called *addiya* - are given to the *dahira's* sheikh and/or to the khalifa general. The two leading persons, the president and the treasurer, are elected by the members. They are very important and influential individuals and often the only representatives of the *dahira* who have any contact with the marabout. The principal exception is the yearly pilgrimage to the marabout and/or to Touba (Wolof: *magal*[4]), to see the khalifa general. Then all the members join together for the pilgrimage. The sheikh has no lists of names of the members, who vary considerably over time. Many *talibés* remain active in one particular *dahira* only for a short time. Membership in a religious association is more or less voluntary although the disciples' participation may be a forced one, due to social pressure from the neighbourhood. According to information from some social workers in the town of Mbacké this is actually the case, especially for poor and divorced women.

---

[4]   The date for the magal differs a little from one year to another which makes it possible to chose a Thursday for the visit.

120

However, membership in a prestigious marabout's *dahira* means forming part of a social network, which could also provide poor women with access to otherwise hidden resources.

Female Participation

Even if the *dahira* is not a particularly female phenomenon, it fits very well into other forms of women's organizations, be they *tontines* (wolof:*nat*), saving associations, or *mbotaye*, social self help associations. Not only in the Mouridiyya but also in other brotherhoods, the presence of women in the *dahiras* is remarkably strong and their participation often intense. Women contribute considerably both with money and work to the practical arrangement of *dahira* activities and with the preparation of food for all the religious feasts. They help actively in the organization of the *gammous*, which in the Mouridiyya context means religious meetings with specially invited guests who sing and give speeches on religious subjects. However, due to the fact that they are women and considered impure or polluting because of their menstruation periods (see above), they cannot perform the most important initiation ritual, the vow of obedience to their sheikh. Neither do they take an active part in the singing of the religious songs. Of course they are allowed to sit listening to the mn's singing, which is what they do for hours. However, there are some songs, not containing citations from the Koran, which they can and do sing. I am now referring to fertile women; young girls and post menopause women obey partly under other laws. They are not considered impure but are all the same women, polluters-to-be or ex-polluters.

The *dahiras* are formed by the disciples/members, not by the marabouts themselves - they take no initiatives and remain in their rural villages, far from the urban activities of the *dahira*. Just once a year they receive their disciples and *dahira* members who make a pilgrimage to their marabout to leave him the money they have collected during the year, the so-called *addiyya*. He uses it ideally for giving food and shelter to the poor, to the visitors during the *magal*(pilgrimage) and for improvements in the community in which he lives (construction of mosques etc). *Sadaqa*, alms, are given to the khalifa general in Touba during the yearly *magal* in July, the greatest Mourid manifestation of the year, when the Mourids assemble in Touba to celebrate the memory of their founder Sheikh Amadou Bamba.

The Mam Diarra Bousso dahira

The Mam Diarra Boussi *dahira* in Mbacké was presented to me as a women's *dahira*. This confused me, as I had not previously heard about something similar.[5]

---

[5] Villalón describes in his book on Islamic society and State power what he calls 'aaa unique case in Fatick of an all-women's dahira which claims no affilation with any other order' (L.A.

Being in a preparatory stage of my fieldwork (Spring 1992) when I did not trust my own capacity/ability to understand what actually went on, I asked for an interview with the president, who was a woman. This was not so puzzling, after all, for the women members of the mixed *dahiras* have their own president, to whom the female members address themselves on practical matters. The president, however, reassured me that this was a female association whose members celebrated the memory of sheikh Amadou Bamba's mother Mam Diarra Bousso through their common activities. These consisted in collecting money for the annual pilgrimage to Prokhane in southern Senegal and to go there together each January.

My surprise was great to find a female *dahira* in such a male-dominated society. This was even more puzzling considering the fact that most women were illiterate and said to be unable to manage money in any sizeable quantity. *Dahira* members acting outside the very intimate and informal context of the household and the *mbotaye* 'self-help' groups, where contributions were interchanged between the women for rites-de-passage purposes in cash, cloth or soap, was something new. Here other organizational demands were raised. Going on a pilgrimage to Porokhane required organizational skills and abilities: it was a long journey, comprising two days' absence from home, which meant hiring a vehicle, bringing food etc. There was also a moral component: women should not be travelling around without men 'for fun'. My assistant laughed at my worries and said that this was a feminist *dahira*. These were strong and capable women. But on my question why they had chosen the Mam Diarra Bousso *dahira*, not an association for a nearby sheikh, who could give them *baraka* and protection, the president said in a warm and tender voice:'Because we love Mam Diarra'.

Next time I came back to Mbacké (Autumn 1993) I saw the woman president, again I and interviewed her,the cashier and some of the secretaries. I also attended two *dahira* meetings. The picture became a little clearer. Finally, during my last stay in Mbacké from December 1994 to March 1995 many questions were answered, although there still remain many obscure points concerning this religious association and its *raison d'être*. In my second interview with the president she said to my great surprise that the *dahira* was mixed and there were both men and women members. But how could it be that men would like to attend a *dahira* for Mam Diarra Bousso, the mythical mother figure who is venerated primarily by women? The president insisted, however,that there were in fact male participants. In all they were eighty women members, she said, and around thirty male members. All the women were from the same town quarter, she continued, and most of them were petty traders, mainly trading in cloth and toasted peanuts. Before they traded in smuggled goods from Gambia, but after the devaluation of

the Franc CFA in January 1994, they would buy cloth in Touba, which is a freetown nearby, or in Dakar, and sell it in Mbacké. The young male participants had different professions, mostly tailors and artisans. They were all bachelors and earned some money from singing the *qasaids* and volunteering also in other *dahiras* and occasionally in religious events. Their fame as good *qasaid* singers was well established in Mbacké.

Earlier the association used to meet each Friday, but because it was difficult for the men to come to the *dahira* after the Friday prayers in the mosque, they had now changed the meetings to Monday afternoons. That is, the women gathered each Monday. Once a month the fee for the caisse was collected, the caisse being absolutely central to the *dahira*'s activities and called 'the Calebass of Mam Diarra Bousso'. Half of the money was, as mentioned, given to a Mam Diarra Bousso family representative (*Sokhna* Astou Boury Mbacké in Porokhane) while the other money was used for transportation to the place of pilgrimage and for the food for the trip. The men did not attend every Monday meeting, but when they came they sang the *khasaid* for the women. The men did not make any contributions in money. The fee was low: the women paid 300 franc CFA each month (100 franc CFA are equivalent to 1 Franc Francais). In January 1995 the fee was increased to CFA five hundred due to increased prices on food and transport.

But why the men in the *dahira*? 'We need the men', the president explained, 'for three reasons: for singing the *qasaids*, for heavy work we cannot do and for protection'. I would imagine they especially need the men for their yearly pilgrimage to Porokhane. They then go with the money and the bowls with prepared food. The money can easily be robbed and the bowls are heavy. It is also more respectable to go with men than with only women. 'To be only women, far from home, could be provocative,' said the president; 'it is not said but it is like that.'

The Mam Diarra Bousso *dahira* used to be both a religious association and a *mbotaye*, the form of association mentioned above, which gives contributions to the women for financing the feasts that accompany marriages, name-givings and funerals. The same women were members in both associations. The women met each Saturday, but they did not collect money or clothes more than were needed on the occasions. The sum on each occasion was thousand Franc CFA. 'And what about the men?' I wondered. The women said they were also part of the *mbotaye*. 'But how was that be possible?' I asked really astonished. Well, they were all young men and lacked the financial means for their marriages. As they helped the women to keep the *dahira* going through their physical presence and their singing the religious songs, the women tried to help them in cash and cloth as well when they had their rites of passage feasts. That was the reason for the classification of their 'participation' in the female *mbotaye* association.

During my last stay in Mbacké much time was spent with the members of the *dahira* in their homes, on regular meetings and on special gatherings planning the annual excursion to the *magal* in Porokhane. With the help of two Wolof-speaking assistants complementary data were gathered and checked. This was partly similar

123

to the work of a detective, as the versions presented about facts like the size of the sums collected, not to mention the purpose and meaning of the *dahira* activities, differed widely. Legends about Mam Diarra Bousso and references to her life were constantly intermingled in the women's answers to direct questions, which the women mainly found lacking in interest. As usual in anthropological fieldwork, only presence and patience helped us - to some extent - to find out what *we* consider relevant information. Likewise the president and her board and members were trying to find out how to handle our presence. They seemed to be even more confused than we concerning my and the assistants research roles and eventual mission in relation to the *dahira*. The main purpose with the *dahira* was and is the Mam Diarra Bousso *magal* in Porokhane. Much time is spent in the meetings on planning and discussing the annual trip. Once the great event is over and the participants are back home, one meets to go through all the details of the pilgrimage and to inform non-participating members about the *magal*. A special kind of beverage tasting like bitter coffee is served, called café Touba, which is considered typically Mourid. The older ladies dominate the conversation. The younger women sit together on mats in one part of the courtyard; the older women occupy the central part of the yard and the young men, when they are present, gather around the amplifier in the back of the houseyard.

What are the attractions of the Mam Diarra Bousso *magal*? Besides that it has all the characteristics of a really big religious feast with a voluminous market attached to it, the handing over of the *addiya*, the money collected during the past year, to *sokhna* Astou Boury of the Bousso family and the *ziyara*, the visit to the holy places in Porokhane,constitute the two most thrilling events of the *magal*.The most important part of the *ziyara* which just cannot be missed is the visit to the tomb, where the pilgrim formulates wishes for Mam Diarra to fulfill about what one really needs and wants. Other elements of the *ziyara* are to collect 'holy' water from the well, to visit the places where Mam Diarra used to pound her millet and her son Sheikh Amadou Bamba used to crawl around in the sand before he learnt to walk. The mosque is visited both at night on the day of arrival and again for afternoon prayers if the second day of the *magal* is a Friday.(cf.footnote 3)

The marketplace is another essential par of the *magal*. Friday morning is usually dedicated to visiting the market where the purchases are of two kinds; the women by gifts which bring blessing to close family members who could not join in on the pilgrimage and they buy other items mostly cloth for trading. Thousands of people attend the *magal* the atmosphere is pleasant and the people look happy to be there. Unlike other *magals* where one juste sits in the marabouts house for hours in Porokhane they move around to the different activities and places of the *ziyara*. The pilgrims men and women alike imitate Mam Diarra's pounding her millet by borrowing a mortar from the hands of the Bai Fall disciples,[6] who assist

---

[6] The Bai Fall disciples belong to a subgroup of the Mouridiya. They are followers of Sheikh Ibrahim Fall, Sheikh Amadou Bamba's most well-known and charismatic disciple.

the visitors and ask for alms from them. The symbolic act of pounding, carried out by male pilgrims, transgresses ordinary male norms. The imitation of Sheikh Amadou Bamba's crawling around in the sand as a child which all the visitors do in hope of partaking with their body and soul in the saint's *baraka* also breaks every day norms. This physical activity in combination with the longing for Mam Diarra Bousso's miraculous and mystical power provide the *magal* in Porokhane with a special dimension of grace, pleasure and excitement.

In late 1994 only thirty women were actual members of the Mam Diarra Bousso *dahira*. Out of this number, only seventeen had paid their fee (the *addiyya*) and were allowed to go on the pilgrimage to Porokhane organized by the *dahira* board. The *mbotaye* association had been dissolved because the president said the women did not pay to the *dahira*, only to the *mbotaye*. This caused trouble and conflicts among the members. The main activity for the *dahira* was and remained the pilgrimage to Porokhane, and it seemed that the interest in this had diminished among the younger women. The majority of women in the actual *dahira* were older women - traders and grandmothers. All members except the cashier (who was enrolled in another *dahira* for another marabout through her husband) were also members of another *dahira*, called *Willaya* (wolof: House) in honour of Sérigne Mbacké *Sokhna* Lô, a famous and popular *sheikh* in his fifties, living not far from Mbacké. At the Mam Diarra Bousso Monday meetings a special fee for him was charged by the members for his *addiyya*, the sum being fifty Fr CFA weekly. Each year the members made the *magal* to his house in Darou Khoudoss. This was thus the answer to my wondering about how the women could live without the support and spiritual protection of a living marabout. He could provide his members with the longed for *baraka*. The women as well as the men could work for him when demanded by him or the khalifa general, and these favours would give people both religious blessing and merit (wolof: *tiaba*).

I have chosen to present one member of the Mam Diarra Bousso *daira* who is pious, articulate and seemed to enjoy talking about her religious life and practice. She is a typical member in the sense that she is comparatively old in the eyes of the surrounding community, her children are grown up and she has passed the époque of female life that is mainly characterised by hard work She has both time and money to dedicate to *dahira* activities. She has no incentive to stay as a *mbotaye* member as she is beyond reproductive age and have no further expenditure on rituals for name giving or marriage anymore. *Sokhna* Salimatu Diallo gives her age as approximately fifty when interviewed.[7] She is of the ethnic group Peul (cattle-breeders and milk-sellers who used to be nomads.) She is *geer* considered to be of superior status to the cast people, and she is mourid. She lives in a polygynous marriage in a village outside Mbacké, but has recently moved to her brother's house in town where she will take care of her old mother who is blind.

---

[7] The interview was made by my assistant Muskeba Fofona, in Wolof and translated by her into French. Ms.Fofona Dep. de Sociologie Université de Saint Louis.

Sokhna Salimatu is herself a mother of four children, she has never been to school but studied the Koran as a young girl. She runs a small business of selling oranges from her house. She buys the oranges from the marketplace and the small business gives a good excuse to sit outside and chat with neighbours without being considered idle sometimes she also give children oranges for free. Her husband and sons do not like her engagement in petty trade; this is not something a Peul woman should do, it is beneath her dignity and besides she does not need the marginal income. When I asked her what she did the previous day, she answered 'Yesterday was monotonous because I did not do anything. It is the wife of my older brother who goes shopping in the market place and it is the domestic help who cleans in the house. I sat down outside in front of the table as soon as I got up and then I extended myself on my mat and took my rosary to tell my prayers. You know, now that I am old I follow nothing but the prescriptions from God.'

Like the other members, *Sokhna* Salimatu is a member of both the Mam Diarra Bousso *dahira* and the one of Séringe Mbacké *Sokhna* Lô - to distinguish him from all other Séringe Mbackés that are found in Senegal, his mother's name is added to his. *Sokhna* Salimatu has joined the Mam Diarra Bousso *dahira* because she wants to 'approach God do the *Ziyaras* and also come closer to my marabout'. She thinks one gets much more blessing if one joins a religious association and together with fellow members dedicates oneself to religious activities such as singing and listening to religious songs and collects money each month to prepare for the *magal*. Moreover, she tries to lead a modest and pious life. As an example, she mentioned that she never went anywhere;'you know, I have never attended a *tam-tam*[8] nor gone to a cinema, for I know that those activities will lead you on to bad roads; they distance you from God.' 'And what about blessings, how do you get it?'*Sokhna* Salimatu answered that *barke* blessings begins with the parents, that is the individual starts to get *barke* from her parents by showing them submission and most of all by helping them in all ways ' because it is thanks to them that one lives.' Also, she added 'when the marabout came and ordered his disciples to follow the *khalif's ndigeul* to go to Khelkoum[9] then the whole *dahira* went because we have chosen Séringe Mbacké *Sokhna* Lô as our Sheikh. He is also a disciple of the *khalif* so we had to obey the order of the marabout and that is why we all went and stayed there for a week in order to do agricultural work. Certainly we earned blessing because of our work for the marabout in exchange we will have *barke* as reward for the work.'

[8] Tam-tams are afternoon gatherings held outside the house, where people dance and amuse themselves, accompanied by drums and music the latter mostly from cassette-players with big amplifiers.

[9] Khelkoum refers to a big 'forêt classifié' (protected forest) which was situated in central Sénégal. The Khalif general ordered all the Mourid disciples to cut down the forest in 1992. The forest had been preserved and protected since the time of the French colonialist. Since then he annually gives an order to the disciples to go to Khelkoum for a period of about five days to harvest the millet that is cultivated where the forest used to stand.

'Concerning the pilgrimage to Porokhane'she said' I insist on going there every year because it is a holy place and because that is the place where Mam Diarra Bousso rests. This was the fourth time I went to Porokhane (in 1995) thanks to God, had it not been for him I would never have put my feet there. Between Mbacké and Porokhané there are kilometers and kilometers and it is a long and though journey. Only if you really decide to go there and believe in God the Merciful you will arrive whatever the hardship you encounter on your way. The first time I went together with my husband with a horse and a carriage. The other three times I have been going together with Mam Diarra Bousso *dahira*.

In Porokhane I went to Mam Diarra's tomb first on Thursday and then on Friday to again make the *ziyara* and ask for many things that I need in my life. The others went to the market place on Friday morning, for no matter if the *magal* is in Porokhane, in Touba or in any other place, lots of traders will come with their goods to make money. In Porokhane lots of vendors come from the Gambia amnd sell towels, cloths, matches, jewellery, shoes indeed, many things. What interested me most was the cloth. So I went to the market to buy myself a *khartoum* (a special type of cotton cloth) to were on next *magal* besides a loincloth for my mother-in-law as a gift- I had no intention of going there for commercial purposes. When all of us hade made our purchases we went together to *Sokhna* Astou Boury's room once again and together we sang the *Qasaid* (referring to the Mam Diarra Bousso songs) and talked about things concerning Porokhane. Around two o'clock in the afternoon we went to the mosque, still in the company of *Sokhna* Astou Boury to say the Friday prayers. As the *magal* was on the night between Thursday and Friday, this gave us a great occasion to pray together Thursday and Friday so this was really good luck for us. After the prayer we returned immediately to *Sokhna* Astou's house to prepare the return for Mbacké. And even if the *magal* is exhausting I will always ask God to take me to Porokhane each year with the Mam Diarra Bousso *daira* and also to see to it that all Muslims who would like to go can do it.'

Summing up: Female Religious Participation-The case of the Mam Diarra Bousso dahira

It is obvious that the women, who for ideological reasons are considered second-rate as Muslims in the most important rituals to the men, need the presence and support of the young men to be able to keep a female *dahira* like *Mam Diarra Bousso* going. In this case young men are brought in to mediate between the female *dahira* participants and the surrounding society. That the men are young and mostly not married makes them more accessible for the women; they would hardly have older, married men coming is as 'helpers' in a female dahira. That would certainly have been below their status. The young men thus in a sense help women to holiness. The *qasaid* can only be sung by the young men and they are heard widely from the president's house-yard. These songs are in Arabic, and as mentioned written by the founder of the Mouridiyya, Sheikh Amadou Bamba. The

fact that the songs are based on citations from the Koran explains why women as impure beings cannot sing them. For the *dahira* members it is good that not only the less holy and less prestigious songs about Mam Diarra Bousso, that the women sing themselves in Wolof, are presented. Without the men, the young girls' task would have been to sing for the women, as they did on those occasions where the men did not attend the meetings. Another important fact is related to the men's voices: they are expected to sing loud and they do, fortifying their voices by electronic equipment. The women, on the contrary, are expected to be silent, or in the case of the Mam Diarra Bousso songs, to sing them in a low voice- 'not to distract the men', as the saying goes. In line with this, it can be said that women need men because of the latter's ritual purity; they need men as performers of Mourid rituals for them. The singing of the *khasaids* is the main religious activity of a *dahira*. Women are not allowed to sing them nor to dance to them.[10]

Women should be the listeners. Women's lack of religious knowledge and illiteracy makes them dependent on men who read prayers for them and interpret the legends about Sheikh Amadou Bamba and his mother. Women also need men for the *baraka* that these songs give besides prestige in the town's quarter where the women live (remember that most members are neighbours). The membership in the Sérigne Mbacké *Sokhna* Lo *dahira* provides the women with access to the *baraka* they cannot get through their own *dahira*'s mythical figure, as Mam Diarra died about 130 years ago. The men's role as mediators between marabout and women in the Mourid brotherhood supplements the responsibilities is of the husbands, who are not interested in letting the women penetrate too deeply into their domain. Young men could provide some of these services, traded against material help in the form of money and collective ritual services.

In the Mourid case, the religious authority rests with the marabout. The leadership of the Mam Diarra Bousso *daira* is held by the President who has an important and influential position. Her greatest asset is her social network and her reputed piety. Also, she and the cashier have control over the money, which is collected in the Mam Diarra Bousso calebass. Usually, the president belongs to the group of non-casté (*geer*) which is considered a superior group. The president becomes the patron for her *dahira* members, mostly castées women of lower status, who are her clients. They see her as a kind of social mother, whose many contacts with prestigious social groups and her connections with one or several marabouts can be of help. The president herself maintains links of mutual interest

[10] To say, as I do, that women cannot sing the qasaids, may be a too categorical statement, which I should mitigate as there are a number of exceptions to this rule or norm. As a matter of fact many marabouts do not mind the women's singing; others do not allow it. While they permit the women to sing the qasaids separately with no men present. There is also a generational difference among the Mourid Marabouts concerning their attitude to this issue. The older ones maintain that the women should keep silent, while some younger marabouts trained in reading the Koran and its interpretation hold that it is clearly stated by the Prophet that women should pray and sing just like the men do. According to my own experience in Mbacké, Mourid women neither sing the Cheikh Amabou Bamba qasaids alone nor together with men.

128

and dependence with the marabout of the *dahira,* or in this case, with the *sokhnas* (women of marabout descent or married to a marabout) of the Bousso family. Through her marabout contacts she may gain the opportunity to travel to Mecca to become hajja or a get a trading license for trading or other benefits. The Bousso family needs an active President, as she provides them with members and *magal* visitors, who contribute to the image and the material resources of the Bousso family. And the president needs the members to maintain her position as president - acting as a mother, who can 'protect' her clients/daughters. The participation of the women in the *dahira* has to be seen from the Mourid women's and the men's point of view. The women consider all the things that they do in connection with the *dahira* to be religious acts, which will render them *tiaba,* religious merit. They participate by their presence, by their work, by their organizational skills and by their financial contributions. Many of them, if not all, are devout: they like to hear the legends about the religious leaders and their mothers; they like the songs and the feasts; they attend the *magal* because of the opportunities it affords of going away on an exciting excursion and of preparing and eating good food. They like the social events and to dress up in new cloth and in jewelry. The *dahira* meetings are, besides the religious aspect, an occasion for social activities and a forum for the making of marriage strategies (M'Bow 1994 MS). Female Mourid identity is linked to participation in *dahiras,* in *magals,* in the performance of the *ziaras,* in the preparation of food for the religious feasts, the organization of *gammous* and to the work and money they offer their marabouts. What I see as conserving women's position in Mouridism is the current stress on the female lack of purity, knowledge and *baraka* by the Islamic male activists as well as by the Sufi marabouts and male disciples. One has to be aware of this and discuss it with the Senegalese people one meets, in my case in Dakar, in Mbacké, in the marabout's house and in the market-places and house yards, where the women assemble. Religious and gender ideas seem to constitute 'tough structures, comparatively resistant to change and mutually fortifying each other. Nevertheless, of course, these 'tough' structures continuously adapt to all kinds of change in their surroundings and in so doing undergo many transformations. The whole phenomenon of a female *dahira* like the one called Mam Diarra Bousso is proof of such an adaptation to a new era, in which women are partly able to overcome their ideological, culturally constructed handicap in religious life and in the society at large by involving young men in women's pious activities, trading men's protection, prestige and *baraka* against women's financial resources and ceremonial services. To reach that far, money, age and civil status must work together to make it possible for women to lead such activities. A good reputation for being pious, honest and comparatively well off opens up wider fields of religious and economic activities for women. Added to this as the image of the mother has positive religious Sufi as well as secular connotations in Senegal, the Mourid women are especially motivated to become members in a *dahira* which venerates the memory of an ideal and almost sacred mother figure like Mam Diarra Bousso.

References

Buitelaar, Marjo (1993) *Fasting and Feasting in Morocco. Women's participation in Ramadan* Oxford/Providence: Berg

Copans, Jean (1980): *Les marabouts de l'arachide. La confrérie mouride et les paysans du Sénégal.* Paris: L'Harmattan.

Christian Coulon (1988): 'Women, Islam and baraka' in Christian Coulon and Donal Cruise O'Brien (eds): *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Christian Coulon and Odile Reveyrand (1990): *Islam au feminin: Sokhna Magot Diop: cheikh de la confrérie mouride* (Sénégal). Travaux et documents no 25. Bordeaux: Center d'Étude d'Afrique Noire.

Lucey Creevey (1992): *The Sword and the Veil: Islam and Women in Senegal* (unpublished manuscript).

Moumar Coumba Diop (1981): 'Fonctions et activités des dahira mourides urbains (Sénégal)'. *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines: Villes au microscope.*

Donal Cruise O'Brien (1971): *The Mourides of Senegal: The Political and Economic Organization of an Islamic Brotherhood.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Donal Cruise O'Brien (1988): 'Charisma comes to town' in *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kathryn S March and Rachelle Taqqu (1982): *Women's Informal Associations and the Organizational Capacity for Development.* Cornell University: Rural Development Committee, Center for International Studies.

Penda M'Bow (1994) MS '*Les femmes dans les associations réligieuses en milieu urbain*'.

Reconstruction of Islamic Knowledge and Knowing; A Case of Islamic Practices among Women in Iran

Zahra Kamalkhani

This paper attempts to give some understanding of women's religious activities in the context of Islamic tradition and modernity in Iran. By modernity of Islamic practices, I mean a search for new knowledge, a positive stance toward innovation and a quest for social and political development which reshape tradition. My view supports those who argue that Islamism supports mass education and represents a particular brand of modernity rather a reaction against it (Caplan Lionel 1987, Eickelman 1992, Horvatich 1994). This article show some of the consequences for women's social and political mobility in today's Iran.

A common explanation for the rise of Islamism in general and the Islamic segregation of the sexes in public spheres in particular is that it expresses a desire to return to a traditional essentialist Islam of the past as well as being against social and economic modernity. Furthermore among the conventional scholarship the Islamic tradition of the past are often understood as religious marginalisation of women, patriarchal dominated, with the female segregated and veiled. These classical Middle East cultural elements often viewed as social symbols of political and economic subordination and segregation by western observers. But Western observers commonly ignored the existence of women's active religious role. It would be too facile to describe the "return" of the women to religious orthodoxy as simply reactionary or imitating male culture. In my view such a line of approach neither gives us a comprehensive understanding of contemporary Muslim women's Islamic awareness, nor provides an understanding of practices and the innovative nature of Islamic knowledge. Looking at the development of women's life situations under the new economic and political turbulence in many Muslim societies, a new perspective is required to give us knowledge about the increasing number of women entering into Islamic orthodoxy and intellectualism.

One often notices that the discussion of Islamism and 'Islamic fundamentalism' is restricted to the culture of the male elite and their participation in the movement. Women's relation to the main-stream of Islamic practices remains largely unrecorded and has not received adequate attention in terms of their contribution to Islamic awareness and Islamic nationalism in Iran. However, there is a new Islamic zeal developing in relation to women, which is evident in a female Islamic movement and involvement. Many aspects of women's life situations have become the province of the Islamists by means of the educational control and religious involvement. In particular, this has affected the arena of

traditional religious rituals, the religious socialization of the new generation and educational opportunities for the young. (Higgens 1994; Yaganeh, N 1993:12, Eickelman 1992).[1]

Below I firstly give some examples of Iranian women's religious activity and secondly, discuss the way in which local religious life becomes a locus for the reproduction of new Islamic meanings and acquires a political dimension.

Women's Religious Activity in 1989

As part of my Ph.D program and for the purpose of anthropological observation, I planned to follow women's social life in post-revolutionary Iran in 1989. Although my original research proposal was not concerned with the study of women's religious life, by the second day of my arrival I had learned that women were engaged in something of importance that had escaped my attention till then.

On the second day of my arrival, I participated in a religious meeting in which the entire Koranic verse *anam*, the so called *khatm-e anam* (Koran: sura 6) was recited. That was a ritual of annual memory (*sar-sal*) of one of my relatives where two female preachers were in charge and my relatives were host. There I met another relative who invited me to her Koran meetings (*jales-e Koran*) in which she was in charge of the Koranic lessons. This kind of meeting is open to the public and a place to meet other relatives, friends and neighbours. A few days later I went to her Koran lessons which were packed with twenty women, including some with their school going daughters or young sons, in the sitting room of a private home. Then I learned about other religious meetings (*rowzeh-e zananeh*) where a different host and a female preacher were in charge and that were carried on in different parts of the town.

I participated in several of these Koran meetings on a regular basis over the period March-August 1989 (covering the muslim lunar months of Ramazan, Shawwal, Dhul-Qa'adah,Dhul-Hijjah, Muharam and Safar). I started with one meeting and soon I was accepted as a participant or acquaintance to a series of meetings where religious rituals were carried out by one or several female preacher and was arranged on public holy days or family religious rituals and extensively on every day during the fasting month (Ramazan) and the mourning months of Muharam and Safar. Some religious meetings followed the Islamic calendar, others were performed on auspicious days such as on Thursday evening for reciting of *nodbeh*,[2] or Friday morning for reading the blessed text of *komyl*,[3] or *joshan-kabir* from the shi'i book of Mafatieh.

These religious meetings were performed at specific times of the day such as in the early morning or evening, and in specific months of the year such as

---

[1] Although it has been difficult to determine the exact number of women involved in higher education, according to Higgens there were five times as many female students at the college level in 1990-91 as in 1977 (Higgens 1994:32).

[2] A verse of Mafatieh that is an appeal to the imam Mahdi or imam-Zaman, the awaited messianic figure among 12th Shi'imam.

[3] A verse said to be named after one of imam Ali's followers called Komyl and full of merit for it forgives sin.

132

Moharam and Ramazan. The annual meetings were on specific days such as the commemorating of the second Shi'i Imam Hasan, and of his brother, the third Imam Husain. The most blessed days were considered to be the commemoration days for Imam Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, and the day on which it is believed that Muhammed nominated Imam Ali as his successor (aid-e ghadir), a legitimate successor in Shi'i view. Other religious meetings were those celebrating the last day of the month of fast (aid-e fitr),and the day of sacrifice (aid-e ghorban). On each of these occasions one can see Koran meetings arranged in one or other private houses. Motivated meetings were generally carried out throughout the whole year, but it was thought that the flow of barakat (grace) would be greatest for one's religious activity on holy months and days/nights.[4]

Women's Religious Activity in 1994

Recently in my second period of fieldwork in 1994, during the three Islamic lunar months of Muharam, Safar and Rabi-ul-Awwal (June-August 1994) I participated in the same local female religious meetings. There I came to know a new religious meeting, recommended by one of my female informants, said to be a place where discussions attained a higher Islamic standard than at the regular meetings I used to attend. The religious meetings were arranged in a newly opened public house named after the prominent third Shi'i imam Husain (Hosyneh) and was donated as waghf to the community by its owners who was a religiously oriented elderly childless woman from a well-off religious family. Hosyneh is a mosque-like public religious hall where religious meetings, communal prayers and sermons are performed. There were three preachers of different rank who gave daily speeches and were in charge of ritual on different religious themes. One started at seven in the morning with preaching and instructing on problems of ritual and was followed by the higher ranked preacher who often arrived with several books in her hand to recommend to the audience and carried the Koran commentary (tafsir). At the end it was the turn of the ritual expert who performed the religious tragic and narrative song (noheh) about one of the prominent Shi'i Imams. This meeting was arranged at the expense of the host during the entire months of Muharram and Safar.

On the second day of the month of Safar I was on my way to the rowzeh and before I entered the house I could hear very clearly the voice of the preacher who was reciting and singing a sorrowful song (noheh) in honour of the 12th Sh'ii Imam; Imam Mahdi; the awaited messianic figure.[5] Although loud-speakers have been commonly used since the revolution as often a large crowd gathers at female religious meetings, this was very surprising to me in light of my experience from other Koran meetings in charge of traditional preachers, who usually made sure that their voices was not heard outside of the hall. Generally it is forbidden to let men hear the voices of women reciting the Koran and there was a conservative

---

[4] *Arbein, tasoa and Ashora* are among the most popular religious Shi'i days when taking and receiving meals was certain and for that reason my host did not prepare lunch.

[5] It is believed that the 12th Sh'i Imam who have gone into occultation in AD 874, will return back to his Muslim community when people's life is impregnate with injustice.

view in this regard among the ritual experts. Later on I found that the song was a popular greeting text (*ziyarat*) call Al-Yasin performed by a guest preacher. There the narrative of the story about the Imam Mehdi in a mourning song joined together and created a strong emotional performance.

When the meeting was finished I did get a chance to approach the preacher who performed the sorrowful song. She was a young student in the final phase at a high-level girls' religious school in Shiraz. I expressed my surprise to her that her loud and effective performance could be heard outside by the pedestrians (meaning, by men). She insisted that it was necessary to give merit to all her listeners on such a holy day. To her the religious message was give priority over gender segregation and the taboo on women's religious voices being heard in public. This is viewed more conservatively by traditional preachers who explicitly ensure that men do not hear their voices. To my surprise a few days later at the meeting I approached a stall which used to sell Islamic cassettes of male clergy and Islamic books, and was able to buy the worship *do'a* of Al-Yasin, which was performed the other day by the Islamic student. This was the first time I heard the recorded voice of a female preacher. Later I learned that there were also other cassettes that I could borrow after becoming a member of the preacher's private library which was located in her home.

All these performances have meant an accumulation of articulated Islamic knowledge and a sense of cultural innovation. First, to a new graduate preacher the importance of religious intention has become an alternative solution to some of the taboos on women's public religious acts. Second, the importance of the development of Islamic ritual practices lies in the fact that such religious meetings and this form of family financial endowment have become powerful and popular. One can also say that to some degree these forms of female religious activities and family economic contribution are not new and also found place in pre-revolutionary period.

What is significantly new is the way religious knowledge is mediated to local audiences by popular means. My religious companion reminded me that the host couple of the new women's Islamic house (Husyneh) was the same who during the former shah regime presented a golden door to the shrine of the Shi'i third Imam (Imam Husian) in Najaf in Iraq. She meant they were always earnest believers. That showed clearly the extension of communal religious performance and in the integration of female Islamic experts into more public Islamic arenas. It was also surprising that the large number of learned and young seminary leaders often attracted bigger audiences than their former elderly teachers or traditional local preachers.

In order to explore further some of the modern social dimension of traditional female religious activity, first I must provide to the reader some understanding of the customary practices and initiation forms of these Koran meetings.

Initiation of Religious Rituals

These women's religious meetings were often held to fulfil a vow (*nazr*) expressed through sponsorship of a saint or the needy. For example, a woman may vow that if a particular request is granted or a personal or family difficulty remedied, she

134

will sponsor a specific kind of religious ceremony. These votive meetings were different according to personal desire and ritual form and were initiated by women of various social classes. They were open to women and were often arranged privately in homes or in some of the religious public building such as the Islamic school or colleges and the female religious house (Hosyneh). Female networks of kinsfolk, friendship or neighbours, mobilized participants from one meeting or a local neighbourhood (*mahaleh*) to another. Some of these religious meetings which were started during my first field- work March-August 1989, still carried on the annual Muharam meetings in my second fieldwork in June-August 1994.

The meetings were also arranged in order to receive blessings to protect or enhance the host's health and wealth. Giving a religious meeting is often organised on a regular basis, but is most frequent during the holy days and months. These are the kinds of religious meetings arranged to honour promises given in return for a happy completion of a wish. Often several female co-organisers shared the tasks of serving participants with drinks taking care not to miss any of them. They expect to receive a gift of merit in return for such a religious work. This type of task is consider an honourable religious work earning religious merit (*sawab*), not least for those young female religious students who stayed in the yards to sell the religious books of prominent clergy and Islamic speeches and lessons on cassettes to those attending. For the host and co-organiser it was mainly the celebrating a fulfilled vow of family issues and merit-making which was expected to bring prosperity for this world or after death to oneself and other close relatives, living or dead.The more expensive rituals included one comprising a communal meal in honour of the shi'i martyr, brother of the shi'i third imam Husian. The large votive communal meal was usually given by wives of affluent businessmen and seldom initiated among lower middle class families due to high food prices.

Religious meetings may be divided into three significant parts, 1) Reciting the holy verses either from the Koran or Mafatie[6] 2) Exegesis of Koran (*tafsir*), 3) Narrative of women's lessons of worship (*masaleh-go'i*) from the book of solutions to everyday problems (*Resaleh halol-masaleh*).[7]

The women in charge of rituals were preachers, either graduates of a theological school (*hyozeh* or *maktab*), and/or brought into such a career as a result of religiously learned parents, or having a clergy husband. For a woman to become a religious leader, knowledge of the Koran is needed of which a minimum is to be able to recite one of the popular holy verses for example *komeyl*, *nodbeh* or *anam*, and to give lessons on obligatory prayers. However, it may not be necessary to have a deep knowledge of Arabic or a religious background through descent to become a leader of Koran meetings. For instance, the lowest rank of preacher is that of the so called *Anami* a title given to one who can recite the popular Koran verse of *anam*, as explained to me by informants. No matter how limited one's knowledge of the Koran, it brought income and an independent job. The income earned by these female religious experts varied between several

---

[6] Mafatieh or Mafatieh-il jenan is a Shii book of prayers. It means a key to paradise and it consists of a collection of sacred verse and the Prophet's collected by Imam Ali and then by his other successors imams and finally by Abas-Qumi.

[7] The issue used in 1989 was a collection of statements by Khomeini.

hundred and a thousand tomans depending on the significance of the occasion and the generosity of the host. In general, that often amounted to more than the wage of an average teacher at a state school.

For those attending the meeting, participation entail both social and spiritual experiences, spending time with female friends or co-religious seminarians (*ham-jalesi*). While the preacher earns respect and income and furthers her spiritual career, those attending the meetings expect to earn religious merit for reciting the Koran and initiating vows. The atmosphere of the meetings was spiritual, relaxed, friendly and flexible- some following a routine of reciting and chanting and others relating more of the tradition of the Prophets, commentary on the Koran and reciting prayers.

Political Dimension of Koran Meetings

Those female preachers who were highly educated attracted larger crowds than the more traditional and less educated preachers in 1994. They were popular for giving a high standard of Islamic talk and realistic instructions in religious matters. They were identified as highly knowledgeable (*alem*), spiritual and skilful speakers. They could achieve large attendances across social categories including students, schoolgirls and higher middle class women. Female preachers are ranked by their followers as good speakers according to their knowledge of the Koran, Arabic language, their form of *tafsir* and how emotional they are in performing religious song (*noheh*). They accept pupils and university students as private students for giving lessons in the Koran. The popularity of the teacher has much to do with the Islamic state's compulsory demands for knowledge of the Koran , basic prayers and Islamic ideology on the part of those trying to get access to university or entering a civil service employment. Demands for higher Islamic knowledge promoted knowing and reciting the Koran from being a traditional interest among neighbourhood housewives and older local women in pre-revolutionary times to being the core of the national school curriculum and university studies.

There are characteristic differences among female preachers. Some project a stronger association with the Islamic state, according to local categories of being hezbullahi, while others show no concern for daily politics. By following my *co-rowzeh* goer or on my own from one religious meeting to another, it became clear to me that the politically oriented *hezbullahi* preacher made repeated references to women's religious modesty, to cover themselves and adopt a modest behaviour in conservative ways, whereas the politically neutral one (*bi-taraf*)took a more moderate view.

The preacher Mostafi was often the one who raised the Islamic state's particular concern of veiling in most of her speeches in public places or at private homes in 1989. Through story-telling and reciting words from the Koran the preacher Mostafi sought to illustrate the Islamic ideals and framework of meaning. Let me give a few examples of the way in which she communicated her religious lessons at two different meetings.

The first one was the case of a widow who arranged an annual memorial Koran meeting of *khatm-e anam* for her husband in June 1989. Relatives both distant

(including me) and close as well as friends and neighbours attended. In such a meeting the preacher is in charge and the Koran chapter of *Anam* is read thoroughly by several attendants. The preacher frequently interrupted her reading of the Koran to offer *tafsir* and, whenever there was mention of the terms for external and internal enemies (*monafeghin*) given in the Koran. She carefully used the opportunity to criticize "new Islamic veiling"of those women who were wearing thin stockings and the fashionable Islamic suit (*mantu*)[8] After the ceremony, the initiator of the *rowzeh* complained that she was very disappointed, and that the memorial ceremony for her husband had been used for political ends, which was an insult to his memory. The domain of family Islamic ritual activity has become an arena for internal social and political discourses of 'true' and 'false' Muslim women's identity.

Criticizing the inconsistent behaviour and distorted practice of "Islamic" veiling among women, the preacher Mostafi repeatedly requested 'proper' veiling and gave lesson on its correct application. She often criticized women who adopted full cover for *rowzeh* and a loose cover outside in the streets, as being unconcerned about their prospects for the next world. Her remarks were directed at contradictory behaviour of the middle class veiled women who changed veil from one occasion to another. Such a change in veil and the adoption of contemporary fashionable styles of covering garment were considered worldly (*donyavi*), which was associated with the kind of behaviour that classified as "dolly"; i.e., branded as artificial, exhibitionist, provocative, and westernized. This reflected irrationality and materialism which should be avoided even in the private sphere in interaction with bachelor male relatives. She often accused those women of undermining the Islamic revolution ideology with improper covering and repeatedly saluted the Prophet Muhammad and his family, requesting participants to send also blessing to the leader of revolution (*rahbar-e enghelab*) and his successor (*nayeb-imam*). Although a 'true' religious covering might seem unattractive in the present, it would bring rewards in the long after-life. According to preacher Mostafi, women wearing a proper *chador* (a full length veil) despite the warmth and discomfort involved, displayed the quality of their social tolerance, the firmness of their faith and their superiority in worldly matters (March 1989). To her,"true" female Islamic identity was defined by restrictive covering of body and hair and reserved social behaviour.

The political objective became apparent in the course of such religious speeches. Requesting participants to send loud blessings (*salvat*) at the end of a religious meeting was another example of such political differences between preachers. During my first field work after the Iran-Iraq war in March 1989, the dominant themes at the end of each *rowzeh* were the blessing of martyrs, Islamic state fighters (*Razmandegan-e Islam*) and demanding ill fortune for those acting as internal and external enemies of Islam (*monafeghin*).

A preacher could be identified by some of her students as being affiliated to the state's Islamic policy; *Hezbullahi*, if after each sermon she called for a special

---

[8] The latest styles were tight in that time and considered to be provocative as it made bodily shape clear to men in contrast to the true Islamic styles, which is suppose to be simple, loose and non-provocative.

merit to the leader of the revolution Imam Khomeini (*imam-e umat*), to his successor Khameini (*nayeb-e imam*) and to prime minister Rafsanjani. A preacher was known as neutral (*bi-taraf*) who extended the *salvat* to not more than the leader of the revolution (*imam-khomeini*). To participants this meant avoiding political issues but gave her recognition of the central figure to avoid any problem for her work.

The *hezbullahi*'s leader used veiling and showed support to the Islamic state by using both personal and community idioms to signal being a "true" Muslim.

Disseminating Islamic Learning through Mass Education

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, it appears that political and socio-religious reforms have been transforming some aspects of the cultural 'tradition,' by reshaping former secular structures of the society with Islamic norms and values into the post-revolutionary religious, political and social reform system. At the time of my first fieldwork in Iran in 1989, it was evident that girls' religious education had become a central mechanism for the transmission of Islamic learning and political resistance among young women. The former religious schools and local Islamic activity had increased in size and numbers five years later in 1994. For example, a girls' religious school which was established in 1973 was converted to a theological college for training female preachers and ritual leaders in 1994. Although Muslims traditionally the prize search for knowledge and learning idealized in the persian saying 'from cradle to grave seek knowledge', religious knowledge of a high standard including Arabic, prayers and jurisprudence (*fegheh*), became a mark of higher standard of one's faith *and* the social requisite for getting a job or passing academic exams.

After more than a decade, the Islamic state in Iran has been able to launch educational reforms that have resulted in building up a system of Islamic universities, colleges and religious schools[9] whose graduates acquire a broader religious knowledge, which subsequently speeds up access to job opportunities under the Islamic Republic. This development is part of the Islamisation process that has resulted in the production of new religious meaning and identity within the recognized frame of the society in which women are mobilized rather than marginalised.

The Islamic state aims to disseminate Islamic knowledge that may break down the classical dividing boundary between popular Islam and textual Islam. The Islamic state adopts the unity of education and Islamic knowledge as an important strategy for developing the Islamic national identity of both men and women. The Islamic Republic formulated a series of direct and indirect policies on women´s social participation, including in national politics, education and employment (see also Nahid Yaganeh 1993:11). through which women were to be incorporated into the nationalist movement as for example Islamic teachers and educated preachers. In addition, the relatives of those who gave their lives for their religious community (martyrs), associated male or female members of religious state organs

---

[9] For a description of male religious school in Quom see Fischer1980, Thaiss 1979.

138

such as the Islamic construction forces (*basiji*) and the Islamic guards (*sepahi*), are also rewarded by the Islamic state in economic policy and educational recruitment (Nader Habibi 1989). The martyr's relatives are promoted as first class citizens and get access to higher social welfare and better jobs. Twenty to thirty percent of university places and higher standard schools are reserved for male and female relatives of such groups.

The Islamisation of the educational system by means of moral and political forces has been one of the prime concerns of the regime in Teheran since the Revolution in 1979. The growth of Islamic literacy through various means of education and the transmission of knowledge in nurseries, school, university curricula, customary Koran courses, religious seminaries and the mass media have intermingled with distinctive forms of knowledge which consist of traditional, ideological, intellectual and textual knowledge under a subject called Islamic science (*ma'ref-e islami*).

Concluding Remarks

My approach to Islamic ways of knowing among women has described a form of knowledge by considering two issues: 1) customary religious learning and 2) post-revolutionary reformulation of Islamic mass education. Firstly, it is clear that women's exclusive Koran meetings in local areas and as part of family rituals, represent an Islamic core arena where women mobilise and display distinctive religious authoritative roles. Secondly, the Islamic elite and Islamisist have influenced deliberately the content of customary female rituals.

The development of local religious activity shows that the ways of learning Islam have changed from being a textual knowledge only accessible to a few cleric families or Islamic scholars, to include broader social categories crossing class, age and gender boundaries. The discourse about Islamic learning and knowing include both the process of every day experiential practices and state based institutionalized teaching. Such a dual learning approach has empowered both contemporary Islamic intellectualism and a created new loci for political mobilisation.

Academic Islamic scholarship focus mostly on the textual and normative tradition of Islam. That is considered as superior knowledge a 'great tradition' - to use a Redfield term. Since the superiority of the 'great tradition' classically has been embodied by public and scholarly tradition, most scientific reports about Islamic beliefs and practices concern male religious tradition, not female participants and religious experts. Men were often considered to be prominent in Islamic organization and Islamic rituals.

The traditional nature of Islamic female knowledge has developed from being publicly invisible and personal to being a focal point of national muslim identity building under the Islamic republic in Iran. We need to achieve a better understanding of the role islamic text and literacy play in everyday experience and not draw an artificial boundary between what people read and what they believe or practice in everyday life. The traditional Islamic knowledge promoted through familiar religious events and formal national education plays a crucial role in the modern political economy of the Islamic Iran. The compulsory orthodox lessons

such as the perfect recitation of the Koran, understanding its meaning and knowing the ritual of prayers, dealing with death, fast, ablution, Friday and communal prayer, Islamic philosophy, etc., are regarded as an discrete subject to be taught from a Muslim mature age (for girls 9 for boys 12) under the national educational reforms. Modern Islamic education in contemporary Iran gives a simultaneous flow of traditional Islamic knowledge and interpretation of its present-day practices. We can not deny that in the modern Islamic world, female students are increasingly aware of global political forces through the information apparatus of native state. This may foster the forces of resistance and encourage a new Islamic consciousness among young and educated women. Entering into political and anti-imperialism debates opens gates to the public area and entering religio-professional careers.

In contemporary Iran many aspects of women's life situations have become the province of the Islamist both by means of control and active involvement; in particular, this has affected the arena of women's traditional religious rituals, their socialization and education. The so-called 'popular' Islam often identified with the nature of beliefs among ordinary muslim in particular women, has become interwoven with organized higher education and re-articulated both in the local and national context. The establishment of new theological schools and religious curricula and the extension of customary religious arenas and events has brought women more than ever into the active religious field. For me it was a matter of considerable surprise to discover several new public religious arenas, new mosques, regular religious meetings in private homes and even two new shrines in my local city in 1994. Such changes became even visible in the period of my second fieldwork in 1994, when the merit of giving religious lessons seemed to have increased even more. Women in general have become more religiously and politically visible in the private as well as in the public arenas, through the customary channels of religious gatherings and through teaching in state institutions including schools (semi-secular and religious), universities. mosques and Islamic cultural centers.

The anthropologists need to pay greater attention to the role of persistent traditional learning and its reformulation via the local religious spheres and events in the process of Islamisation. In present-day Iran, the Muslim intellectuals and moderate theologians responsible for the state ideological structure, encourage women to take an Islamic role as educated people and display their Islamic loyalty to the state, community and family more publicly. Women's presence in educational institutions was regarded as an urgent political and a modern policy for Muslim nation building. (see also Paidar 1995:312). This line of encouragement provided them religious reward and integration as active believers in the context of competition in a constrained market for economic and employment opportunities.

The Islamic Republic imposed a reconstructed national educational system for the Islamisation of society, but it popularity and strength is not solely dependent upon that. The interconnection of both traditional Koran meetings, practical experiences of Islamic learning and recent female Islamic theology training has brought about a strong sense of cultural accretion and an intertwining of classical boundaries of textual and popular Islamic knowledge. Thus the Islamisation of women links customary religious practices and the new educational institutions.

140

To me, the nature of Islamism represents a reunion of various modern elements with a traditional female religious fluidity and a state of socio-economic modernity. Amongst which is brought into focus the forgotten Islamic culture of women and a new role in terms of Islamic Republic precept.

References

Antoun, R. 1989, *Muslim Preacher in the Modern World: A Jordanian Case Study in Comparative Perspective*. Princeton Univ. Press

Berkey, J.P 1991, 'Women and Islamic Education', in Keddie, N & Baron, B (eds), *Women in Middle Eastern History* London Yale University Press.

Bourdieu, P&J.C. Passeron 1977, *Reproduction in Education, society and Culture*, Beverly Hills, London Sage

Caplan, Lionel 1987, 'Introduction' *Studies in religious Fundamentalism* London, Macmillian.

Eickelman F Dale 1985, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, Princeton Univ.Press

Eickelman F Dale 1992,' Mass higher education and the religious imagination in contemporary Arab societies', *American Ethnologist* 19(4):643-655

Farnea, R & Fernea, E. 1972, 'Variation in Religious Observance among Islamic Women'. in N.Keddie (ed), Scholars, *Scholars, Saints and Sufis*. Berkeley:California University Press, 385-401

Fischer, M 1980 'Madrasa: Style and Substance', *Iran, From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, Harvard Univ. Press

Habibi Nader 1989, *The journal of the Society for Iranian Studies*, Volume XXII, Nr.4, pp 19-46

Kamalkhani, Z 1993 'Women's Everyday Religious Discourse in Iran', in H. Afshar (ed), *Women in the Middle East; perception, Reality and Struggles for Liberation*, pp.85-95

Higgens,P & Ghaffari, P.Sh. 1994, Women's Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in Afkhami,M & Friedl,E (eds),*In the Eye of the Storm*. London, I.B.Turis

Horvatich Patricia 1995, 'Ways of knowing Islam', *American ethnologist* 21 (4):811-826

Redfield,Robert 1953, *Peasant society and culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Thaiss, G. 1978, 'The conceptualization of Social Change through metaphor', *Journal of Asian and African studies*, 8/1-2, pp 1-13

Tapper, N. 1983, 'Gender and Religion in a Turkish Town: A Comparison of Two Types of Formal Women's Gatherings' in Holden, Pat (ed), *Women's Religious experience*, London, Croom Helm

Piscatori J.P 1989, *Islam in the Political Process*

Paidar 1995, *Women and the Political Process in twentieth century -Iran*.Cambridge University Press

Yaganeh, N 1993 ' Women, Nationalism and Islam in Contemporary Political Discourse in Iran' *Feminist Review*, No.4.