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Women in the City in Algeria:
Change and Resistance

Muslim migrants in Europe are often represented as people who move from a bounded cultural and physical location to the global world, where they are seen as either resisting or absorbing global (Western) cultural traits. This holds particularly true when it comes to representations of migrant women from Islamic countries. Indeed, in popular and often in academic understandings, there is a growing tendency to perceive Muslim women who adopt Islamic symbols as embodying an 'authentic' and traditional culture, as opposed to secularized women who, on the contrary, are often seen as hybrid or westernized – and therefore 'modern'. These discourses find an echo in a trend that is forcefully taking place in the Middle East.

RUBA SALIH

In the last few years, there has been a plethora of arguments maintaining that by combining Islamic behaviour with the quest for self-determination, Muslim women are attaining a more 'culturally authentic' path towards a self-determination that rejects westernization and the homogenizing processes inherent in globalization.

In the context of migration, 'multicultural' perspectives reinforce this kind of understanding by perceiving Muslims as embodying an essence, claiming respect for a set of static and immutable traditions that they would automatically and uniformly reproduce in continuity with supposedly past practices and beliefs. Although disguised by the narrative of respect for cultural difference, these representations 'reduce the history of the present to the nature of an invariant essence' (Al-Azmeh, 1996 [1993]: 62).

This article draws upon extended research conducted between 1996 and 1998 among Muslim women, predominantly of Moroccan origin, residing in the Emilia Romagna region in the north of Italy.¹ One of the aims of the larger research project was to show how, far from being a shared identity, being Muslim implies a battlefield for contesting and opposing discourses on authenticity, tradition and modernity. Very often at stake in these representations are the definitions of the boundaries that mark belonging to a 'community' or national group.

In the Middle East, secular oriented women's movements have been historically accused of threatening the cultural homogeneity of the national community by introducing Western models and behaviour, and therefore they were and still are labelled as culturally inauthentic, or 'westernized' by the establishment (see Al-Ali, 2000). For Muslim migrants in Europe, the processes of contestation surrounding 'authenticity' and 'tradition' may be amplified, since the boundaries of the 'community' are more in danger of being jeopardized and, therefore, certain Islamic symbols may be actively chosen or imposed as crucial markers of cultural difference.

Confronting Modernities Muslim Women in Italy

Indeed, an understanding of Muslim women's multiple attitudes towards Islam could not dismiss the role played by migration and travel (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1990) and by the new place women inhabit (Metcalf, 1996). The articulation between Islam and discourses around authenticity and tradition is also a significant arena through for grasping, among other things, the diverse processes of identity-renegotiation through which Muslim women respond to a new life in a new place (Salih, 2000).



Muslims and Islamists

For some Moroccan women, and indeed also for some Italian or other Arab Muslim women, Islam is the most crucial aspect of their identity. These women are usually young and well educated, wear a *hijab*, regularly meet in the mosque to study, and endorse what could be defined generically as an Islamist discourse.

These women could be defined as 'Islamist'. They interpret their involvement in learning and knowing the religious texts as the modern way of being a Muslim woman. At the same time, it seems that only by being truly Muslim can a woman be mod-

ern. Study is synonymous with knowledge and modernity. But knowledge can only be Islamic. As one woman stated:

The atmosphere in our families is not really and completely Islamic. Instead of taking a break in our days from our duties to read and study the Qur'an, we are always watching television, handling the remote control. If we continue behaving in such a way, we will remain ignorant, at a low level. We won't learn anything.

Although Islamic practices are shaped by the new local space they inhabit, Islamist women claim that their life in a new country where Muslims represent a minority did not play a role in their rediscovery or reinforcement of an Islamic identity. They perceive themselves as part of the *umma*, an imagined transnational community scattered all over the world, and often insist on defining Islam as a universal religion, with no local variations.

For other women who are not involved with activities in the mosque, who usually do not wear a *hijab*, and only sporadically practise some or all of the pillars of Islam,

being Muslim in Italy either remains or becomes a generic sign of belonging. They might define themselves first as Moroccans or Arabs, and then as Muslims, although their reflections and thoughts about themselves and others often revolve around Islam since in their day to day life in Italy, Islam is the primary frame through which their identities are filtered. These women are nonetheless Muslim, as they consider themselves spiritually, culturally and socially as such. This is important since it is a first way to stress that, although they negotiate religion in various ways *vis à vis* the Italian society, these women are neither hybrid, as they are sometimes defined in other contexts (cf. Khan, 1998), nor westernized. The term hybridity, used to describe these secular attitudes, is misleading for it assumes Islamism is historically and naturally 'authentic', denying its political and profoundly modern nature, whereas women who adopt secular stances are described as deviating from the 'norm'.

Confronting modernities

'Tradition' and 'Islam' are often erroneously seen as overlapping. By attributing different meanings to Islam, women display and articulate different narratives of modernity. For Islamist women, modernity is possible only through knowledge and devout practice of Islam, which is nonetheless presented as a break with past traditions. This new Islam represents their way to progress and to social, cultural and spiritual self-fulfilment. Other women, on the contrary, are engaged with modernity as a fracture, a process of ongoing crisis between past certainties and current challenges, between the refusal of assimilation and the impetus for secularization, and they express this tension through a constant negotiation of and reflection upon diverse cultural models and practices.

Women who embrace Islam in Italy do so in an attempt to distinguish themselves from Western society, asserting a project of

Inaugural Lecture
HARALD MOTZKI

Methods of Dating Muslim Traditions

There are hardly any sources available for the historically most important period of Islam, its first 150 years of existence. We only have at our disposal traditions that can be found in later written collections. The historical reliability of these traditions is doubtful because religious and political developments possibly – sometimes even demonstrably – have distorted, embellished or even created such traditions.

Four main types of dating methods are applied by Western scholars of early Islam to ascertain the historical reliability of traditions, namely: those based on the texts *mutūn* of a tradition; texts based on the collections in which the traditions can be found; those that use the chains of transmitters *asānīd*; and those that take stock of texts as well as the chains of transmitters.

Dating based on the texts of traditions have dominated *Ḥadīth* research ever since Ignaz Goldziher's *Muhammedanische Studien*. Several criteria are applied, such as complexity of the text, level of development, in-

ternal coherence of the textual elements, style and vocabulary. The result tends to be a relative, sometimes absolute chronology of the texts. However, research into the plausibility of the premises and the conclusions that are applied make it clear that results are often unconvincing and that there is no real footing in the texts for the purposes of absolute dating. This is a general problem with the methods that try to date traditions solely on the basis of the texts. The method seems to be useful only when combined with other dating criteria.

Dating based on the collections of traditions received a significant impulse by Joseph Schacht, who applied this method in his book *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. The *e silentio* conclusion plays an important role in this method – a dangerous one given that it provides little certainty because of the few available sources on early Islam.

Dating based on chains of transmitters is applied mainly by Gautier H.A. Juynboll, who developed the *isnād* analysis to a high level. Of crucial importance for this method is the phenomenon of common links, i.e. the same names of persons who come up at a comparable level in the various chains of transmitters of the same *Ḥadīth*. In general, it is assumed that the oldest common link or an immediately preceding common link is the author of the tradition in question. This interpretation of the common link is actually based on premises that can hardly withstand criticism.

Dating on the basis of chains of transmitters as well as texts seems to be the most successful method. In the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, interdependencies between the chains of transmitters and their corresponding texts that can be determined in many traditions play an important role. These interdependencies are seen as indications that we are dealing here with a real process

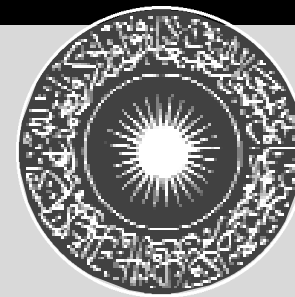
of transmission and not with mere fiction. Thanks to the combination of *isnād* and text analysis, it is possible to make more positive pronouncements on the common links and thus on the dating of a tradition, on the development of the text, and on mistakes and forgeries the variants may contain.

Only after plenty of traditions are dated can scholars of Islam venture to make pronouncements on the authenticity and historicity of what has been transmitted in the sources. Until now, however, things have not developed to that extent. ◀

Harald Motzki was appointed to the Chair of Methodology of Research in Islamic Studies at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Middle East, University of Nijmegen. This article is a summary of his inaugural lecture delivered on 9 February 2001. The full text of the lecture was published separately in Dutch. E-mail: h.motzki@let.kun.nl

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Continued from front page 1: Muslim Women in Italy / by Ruba Salih

self-fulfilment through an alternative (Islamic) morality. However, Islam also represents for them a way of overcoming what they label as backward and traditional features of their cultures. In certain cases, the endorsement of a Muslim agenda and the process of studying and learning become a terrain whereby women negotiate their aspirations for autonomy and self-realization in a sort of public sphere without challenging their husbands' traditional supremacy in the private sphere. Women who actively engage themselves in Islam in Italy constantly confront other Muslim women who, according to them, remain in the realm of ignorance or tradition, or whom they see as losing their identity by compromising with Western values and behaviour. These narratives, however, are highly contested by other Muslim women who invoke a notion of modernity that embraces secular ideas and behaviour and who claim a diverse notion of authenticity.

Whereas Islamist women in the mosque are persuaded that different ways of being Muslim cannot exist because the Qur'an clearly states what being a good Muslim implies, many Moroccan women consider themselves Muslims and adhere to the gen-

eral principles of the Islamic religion but show flexibility in practising them and admit different behaviour. However, Muslim women who display more secular behaviour are not necessarily less embedded within traditional practices. More importantly, women who renegotiate Islam construct their own versions of authenticity by reformulating and accommodating diverse cultural and religious practices.

The secular demeanour displayed by these women does not represent a capitulation to a Western hegemony to which they become assimilated. Migration is certainly part and parcel of women's compulsion for change, since it constitutes a major turning point in their lives, where the confrontation with a different model of living and interpreting religion amplifies their reflections about themselves, their culture and their roots. However, women's renegotiation of Islam also reflects the historical processes of adaptation, negotiation and reformulation of cultural and religious identities that have occurred in postcolonial societies. Indeed, processes of renegotiation of cultural and religious practices are more historically rooted than the more recent Islamist call for

a return to the religious texts as sources of authenticity.

Muslim women's striving to affirm their own subjective positions discloses a power struggle to interpret and define cultural aspects and performances, and highlights contestation of dominant perceptions of cultural authenticity.

Several women shared with me their anxieties and reflections regarding two models and dominant discourses, articulated as the 'Western' and the 'Islamist', both of which they feel are ultimately alien to their identities. Indeed, several amongst the Muslim women I have worked with define themselves as Muslims but refuse Islamism as the only political and cultural frame leading to self-determination without assimilation. For them, authenticity is not a mere and strict respect for some religious norms, but is rather about positioning themselves through genuinely recognizing negotiations as inescapable outcomes of living in a different society. ◀

Note

* Muslims in Italy are estimated at around 600,000 (Muslim organizations provide higher figures: 1,000,000).

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