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Inaugural Lecture Muslim Cultural Politics

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Inaugural Lecture

Muslim Cultural Politics

'Muslim cultural politics' is shorthand for the politics of culture that Muslims engage in and consider in some sense as related to Islam or Muslim culture. This programme investigates emerging forms of culture production and performances with a focus on how particular notions, practices, and participants become authoritative while others are increasingly marginalized. Family dynamics and gender have turned

out to be particularly productive as a prism to work through, both because the family and gender have strong symbolic salience and because starting from the family and gender further broadens the notions of 'the political'. It shifts the attention from politics at the level of the state to the daily-lived micro-politics of family relations and the ways in which the family is symbolically and materially employed in politics.

Central to the various research projects included in this programme is an investigation of the links between public debates and everyday life. Such a turn to the everyday is an argument for inclusiveness, connecting the public to the private in terms of how these spheres are constitutive of each other, overlap, and intertwine. Rather than seeing daily practices of ordinary people as engaged in flexible and fluid performances and creative productions versus participants in public debates as employing essentialist notions of Islam, the programme investigates the various and possibly competing notions of Islam and Muslim culture employed in public debates as well as in everyday life. Currently, projects are dealing with three fields of investigation: family law debates and the everyday, the body politics of representation, and the cultural politics of migrant domestic labour.

Family law and gold jewellery

If conventional accounts of Muslim family law have often concentrated on an analysis of texts, this programme focuses on public debates about family law and investigates people's engagements with legal institutions. Public debates in the 1990s often entailed the involvement of a greater variety of participants and publics, including not only religious authorities and state officials, but also women's organizations, the Islamists, and human rights NGOs.

Turning to other forms of engagement with the legal system, women's strategies with respect to the dower have been studied. A substantial part of the dower – the sum of money the groom has to pay the bride and that is to remain her own property – is usually spent on gold jewellery. Different categories of women do not only hold different points of view about the dower, but also engage in different practices with respect to buying and wearing gold jewellery. If, in public debates about family law reform, secularists and Islamists hold opposing points of view with respect to the dower and gold jewellery, lines of demarcation do not follow those of party politics but rather tie in with those of class, status, and lifestyle.

Covered dress and fashion

Not only wearing gold but also wearing particular styles of dress can be seen as part and parcel of Muslim cultural politics – in this case, the body politics of representation. Whereas both gold and clothing function as a way of making a statement in the public sphere, they occupy different positions in the field of cultural politics. In the case of gold jewellery women employ a quintessentially Islamic institution, the dower, and are backed by both the legal system and public opinion if they claim their rights; gold jewellery is not only a medium to construct a certain identity, but also a major source of economic security. In the

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On 13 March 2003, she delivered her inaugural lecture entitled "Muslim Cultural Politics":

'What's Islam Got To Do With It?' In this lecture she presented the research programme 'Muslim Cultural Politics', which she has initiated at the ISIM, and briefly summarized the results of some ongoing research projects.

case of covered dress, key concepts are not so much rights and sacrifices, but rather religious obligations and fashion, external appearance and inner states of being, and notions of individual and collective responsibility – all issues that are addressed in public debates and that women refer to when discussing their dressing styles. Yet, whereas in public debate dichotomies such as traditional versus modern, cul-

turally authentic versus westernized, and subordinated versus emancipated are commonly employed, women's narratives point to the problems involved in employing such contrast schemes. Many accommodate to the styles of dress appropriate in their social circles, while others go against the mainstream, by either uncovering or covering more strictly. Notions of traditionality or cultural authenticity are quickly subverted when the long-term influences from Istanbul, Europe, or Saudi Arabia, as well as the importance of fashion, are taken into account.

Migrant domestic labour

A third field of research centres on the cultural politics of migrant domestic labour. During the last decades paid domestic labour, often performed by migrant women, has become a growth sector on a global scale. Forms of migrant domestic work can productively be investigated in its relations to 'Muslim cultural politics'. Religious networks and institutions are instrumental in recruitment; overt forms of 'political religion' are very present in public debates; and more covert cultural and religious notions are submerged in normative ideas about the family, labour, and domesticity. If much work on transnational migration has dealt with the engagements of male migrants in transnational political-religious movements, a focus on migrant domestic workers highlights how women take part in, and are objects of, debates about religious-cultural identities, and how they are involved in the embodied expressions of religion that are embedded in the micro-politics of domestic relations.

In short, 'Muslim cultural politics' deals with not only textual, but also embodied and material practices. It includes not only intellectuals and political leaders involved in public debates, but also subaltern women as agents. Addressing such topics as acquiring gold through the dower, covered dress and fashion, and migrant domestic labour demonstrates to what extent the lines between the public and the private are blurred. The subtitle of the inaugural lecture, 'What's Islam Got To Do With It' alludes to the unease some may feel about linking such mundane topics with Islam. Those who do not consider these topics worthy of inquiry may well work with a modernist concept of religion. This programme, in contrast, starts from the perspectives of those relating cultural politics in one way or another to Islam. This is not an argument for returning to an Orientalist perspective that sees Islam *a priori* as an all-encompassing system that determines people's lives, but for including an actor's point of view and for a thorough contextualization of cultural practices and their politics.

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The inaugural lecture will be published by the University of Amsterdam.