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The Netherlands

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Citation

Dessing, N. M. (2002). An Islamic Wedding in a Dutch Living Room. *Isim Newsletter*, 10(1), 31-31. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16767>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16767>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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An Islamic Wedding in a Dutch Living Room

A few weeks ago, I attended a religious wedding in the Netherlands. A Moroccan imam concluded a marriage between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim Dutch woman – a widow with two grown-up sons. Ten people attended the ceremony: the intending couple, the imam and two members of a local mosque, the woman's two sons, and three female friends. The event epitomized in many ways what it means to live in a migrational situation where many religious facilities that can be taken for granted in Muslim majority countries must be reconstructed.

According to Islamic law, marriage consists of the exchange of consent by the intending husband and wife or their guardians in the presence of two witnesses. The exchange of consent, that is, offer and acceptance, must take place during a single meeting of the two parties arranged specifically to this end (*ijab wa qabul fi majlis wahid*). The meeting opens when an offer is made and comes to an end when the parties separate.

If the groom is of adult age and sound mind, his personal and warranted consent is an essential condition for the validity of the marriage under Islamic law. According to the Shafi'ites, Malikites, and Hanbalites, however, the bride's consent, whether in person or by warrant, has no legal validity, even if she has reached adulthood or has been married several times before. In order for the contract to be valid, she must be represented by a guardian (*wali*) for the giving of consent. The Hanafites hold that it is recommended for a bride of adult age to make use of a guardian, but she is not obliged to do so.

Further requirements in Islamic law are the stipulation of a bridal gift that the husband must pay to his future wife and the presence of two qualified witnesses. Islamic law requires neither the presence of a registrar or a religious authority, nor the drawing up of a written document on this occasion. Nevertheless, these institutions and forms of registration have gained significance in the present-day marriage legislations of Muslim countries. In Morocco, for example, the Minister of Justice appoints qualified, professional witnesses. These officials put in writing what they have seen and heard, and register marriages concluded before them

in the marriage register of the competent court.

Most Moroccan couples in the Netherlands undergo a consulate marriage. Consulate marriages are concluded according to the *Mudawwana*, the Moroccan codification of Islamic family law and law of inheritance, and consequently to a large extent also in accordance with Malikite prescriptions. There is no distinction, therefore, between a religious and a civil wedding, as there is for example in the Netherlands and Turkey.*

The ceremony

Our couple's motivation in concluding an Islamic marriage was a wish, particularly on the part of the groom, to legitimize their cohabitation before God. In their case, a consulate marriage was not an option. They therefore approached a Moroccan imam to conduct a wedding ceremony.

The couple had an initial meeting with the imam at the mosque. They discussed the woman's knowledge of and attitude towards Islam and the marriage proceedings. The imam asked if the two wished to marry and if the father of the bride consented to the marriage. He also asked about the intended bridal gift. The bride said that she would be happy with a bouquet of flowers. This provoked laughter, as a Moroccan bride normally receives a substantial sum in cash as a bridal gift. The imam asked her to suggest an alternative gift. The couple decided that the groom would give the bride a ring belonging to his family. At this meeting, the imam also said that the couple, who had been living together for some time, should abstain from sexual relations until the marriage ceremony.

The wedding ceremony took place at the bride's home two weeks later. The imam invited the bride, her sons, and the female guests to take seats in the room where he was sitting with the groom and the two

mosque members. The company sat in a circle. The ceremony started with the conventional light conversation. The imam spoke Arabic, and the mosque members translated his and our words.

The imam checked if all requirements for a legally valid marriage were met. He explained that the two members of the mosque acted as witnesses to the marriage. He then asked the intending bride if her father, who was not present, consented to the marriage. In order to establish his consent, the woman was asked to telephone him. She had not expected this, and she therefore inquired if the imam really wanted her to do so. She then rang her father. She explained the situation to him, and asked him to talk with one of the mosque members. He asked the father if he consented to his daughter's marriage, which he did.

The imam then asked about the bridal gift. The bride confirmed that this would consist of the ring, which was currently being repaired by a jeweller and which the groom would present to her in due course. The ceremony ended with the recitation of the opening chapter of the Qur'an. The official part had lasted approximately thirty minutes. From then on, the gathering took on an informal character, with conversation and people eating cake and drinking lemonade. The meeting ended when the imam, the mosque members, and the groom left by taxi. The bride and the other women then took off their scarves and talked about the ceremony.

Ritual knowledge and competence

How should we interpret this course of events? Our example shows that the transplantation of a ritual from one context to another that does not support it to the same degree results in a loss of knowledge and competence of the ritual actors, and consequently in a considerable degree of improvisation. An imam normally plays no role either in a wedding ceremony in Morocco or at a consulate marriage in the Netherlands. The fact that an imam conducted this wedding ceremony was therefore itself a departure from Moroccan marriage practice. No one, however, expressed surprise at the imam's role on this occasion. On the contrary, the couple felt that his presence was essential to render the ceremony valid.

The imam's understanding of Islamic marriage practice determined the course of events. He said that he had conducted a number of marriages before. From one point of view, however, the formalities of Islamic marriage were not followed strictly. As far as I could see, the groom was not explicitly asked whether he consented to the marriage. The meeting therefore did not include an exchange of offer and acceptance between the groom and the guardian of the bride – a basic feature of an Islamic wedding. When I checked my recollection with the couple later, they denied this. They said that the groom was indeed asked to give his consent, but that I must have missed this exchange.

Furthermore, the imam was unclear about the role of the father of the bride in the ceremony. Was he considered her guardian, and if so, did his consent over the telephone comply with the Islamic prescriptions, or should he have been present at the ceremo-

ny? And what would have occurred if the father had been unreachable or unwilling to give his consent to the marriage?

Creativity and improvisation

Through lack of knowledge on the part of the ritual actors, there was much uncertainty about the proceedings. Creativity and improvisation were important features in this situation. When the imam, the witnesses, and the groom arrived, the sons of the bride and the female guests did not know whether they were permitted to sit in the room with them. They decided to sit in the adjoining room, viewing the ceremony through the open doorway. However, the imam invited them to sit in the room where the ceremony would be held. He thus clarified the situation for the ritual actors.

There were several other examples of improvisation and perhaps also of arbitrariness. In the days before the ceremony, the husband-to-be had said that the bride should wear a headscarf during the ceremony, completely covering her hair. The bride asked the female guests to put on a scarf too. I had brought a headscarf for this eventuality, but the other two women had to pick from the bride's collection. What was the reason for the bride and her guests to wear a headscarf in the imam's presence? Was it to show respect to the imam, because Islamic law requires it, or for some other reason?

The course of events raises questions about the stability and reproducibility of such ceremonies. If an individual imam conducts marriage ceremonies infrequently and these ceremonies are attended by only a few members of the Muslim community, it is likely that no standard form of marriage ceremony will become entrenched in practice. Each marriage ceremony will remain a one-off event, never to be repeated in the same form. On the one hand, this suggests that some ritual elements of the Muslim marriage ceremony will be lost. On the other hand, the lack of consistency will enable new ritual elements to be developed and adopted, perhaps leading to inventive adaptation of the Muslim marriage ceremony to the social and environmental circumstances of the migrational context.

In circumstances where ritual knowledge and competence are difficult to preserve and transmit, ritual actors attempt to give structure and significance to a ritual as best they can, combining partly understood and remembered elements with ad hoc innovations. The outcome is a less stable and sometimes subjectively dissatisfying ritual practice in which attrition is mixed with the opportunity for creative evolution. Our couple, however, expressed complete satisfaction with the wedding ceremony that they had undergone.

Note

* For a detailed account of the marriage formalities and practice among Muslims in the Netherlands, see Nathal M. Dessing, *Rituals of Birth, Circumcision, Marriage, and Death among Muslims in the Netherlands* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

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BOOK PRESENTATION

Islam in the Era of Globalization

Islam in the Era of Globalization. Muslim Attitudes towards Modernity and Identity presents an in-depth discussion of some of the most important questions at present faced by Muslim society. The book is arranged around three core themes, namely globalization, modernity, and identity. The collection combines more general and theoretical elaborations with relevant case studies. Among the topics treated are the global and local dimensions of religious and intellectual discourse and dress codes, the complicated – but not necessarily problematic – relationship between Islam and modernity, the role of religious education in the construction of identity, the interaction of state and 'civil society' in religious education and justice, and the relationship between religious and other factors in processes of social transformation. The case studies cover an area stretching from China and Southeast Asia to the Caribbean.

This publication is of particular interest as it represents a step towards a new synthesis in Islamic studies, namely the cooperation of scholars representing diverse disciplinary traditions and various geographical origins and specializations, including Muslims and non-Muslims. The book will draw the attention of specialists and students of Islamic studies, social sciences, and the humanities as well as the general educated public interested in subjects as diverse as development, modernization, globalization, intercultural contacts, intellectual discourse, gender, religious education, and religious authority.

Johan Hendrik Meuleman (ed.), *Islam in the Era of Globalization. Muslim Attitudes towards Modernity and Identity* (RoutledgeCurzon: London and New York, 2002).