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Piety, Responsibility and Subjectivity in Africa

MARLOES JANSON &
DOROTHEA SCHULZ

On 15 December 2006 Marloes Janson (Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin) and Dorothea Schulz (Indiana University) convened a workshop titled "Piety, Responsibility, Subjectivity: Reconfigurations of the Moral Economy of Gender Relations in Contemporary Muslim Africa" at the Snoeck Hurgronje Huis, Leiden. The workshop and the subsequent public event were sponsored by ISIM, in cooperation with the Knowledge Centre Religion and Development and *ZemZem*, Journal for the Middle East, North Africa, and Islam.

The aim of the workshop was to explore the interrelation between current trends towards moral renewal in Muslim Africa on the one hand, and transformations of gender relations on the other. It situated these changes in the context of postcolonial nation-state politics. Recent reconfigurations in the relationship between the state and society in African Muslim communities, along with processes such as the democratization of religious education, the introduction of new media, and the new currency of a legalistic discourse, have fundamentally altered the basis of conventional understandings of gender-specific spheres of action. The claims and concerns formulated by supporters of so-called "reformist" movements can be seen as engagements with these developments, in forms that are inspired by regionally specific traditions, practices, and understandings of religiosity.

These Islamic movements tend to place a special emphasis on personal piety and individual responsibility in moral reform, rather than centring their efforts on challenging state institutions and political elites. Protagonists of these movements, women and men, understand their endeavour as a return to the original teachings of Islam and to traditional gender roles. Yet, perhaps the most far-reaching effect of their interventions is that they redefine, or temporarily invert, prevailing divisions between male and female spheres of moral practice and public action.

The workshop sought to address these reconfigurations of gender relations by bringing together scholars working on Islamic reform and gender in Africa. Rather than reasserting the common bifurcation between North-Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, it emphasized common themes as well as long-standing translocal ties and influences that connect these two regions of Muslim Africa.

In the first panel the focus was on the redrawing of conventional lines between gender-specific domains of action and authority. By means of the biographic narratives of two marabout women from Dakar, Senegal, Amber Gemmeke (Leiden University) explored women's activities in the Islamic esoteric sciences. Interestingly, by "denying" their femininity—both women emphasized that they did not menstruate although they were still young—these two marabout women were able to achieve renown in a field dominated by men. Gemmeke argued that this should be understood in the context of urbanization. An urban environment, inhabited by migrants searching for a livelihood in an insecure place, may create opportunities for women to launch a career in the Islamic esoteric sciences.

Whereas in Gemmeke's paper female authority in a male domain was central, Marloes Janson focused on male participation in a female domain by means of a case study of the Tablighi Jama'at in The Gambia. This transnational Islamic missionary movement originated in South Asia and proliferated widely in The Gambia during the last decade. Although the movement aims at reinscribing a patriarchal gender ideology, at the same time it provides new roles for both women and men that depart from established gender norms. In order to reduce their wives' domestic burden and provide them with more time for missionary work, Gambian Tablighi men actively engage in household work and childcare. Janson's paper showed that this transformation in gender relations is the outcome of a reorientation to a new form of piety as a means of realizing a virtuous life.

The second panel centred on new declarations of piety and ethical disposition. Although in Nigeria (as elsewhere) reformists attempt to return to the "roots" of Islam, Amidu Sanni (Lagos State University) argued that

one should not define them as anti-modern. By taking the "ultra-Salafi" Nigerian movement Jama'at Tadamun al-Muslimin Najriya as starting point, he illustrated that "secular modernity" is nowadays giving way to "religious modernity." Highly educated Muslims in Nigeria seek to demonstrate that one can be religious and "modern" at the same time.

The Egyptian repentant singers, dancers, and actresses studied by Karin van Nieuwkerk (Radboud University Nijmegen) are likewise searching for new ways to express their newly found piety. Tracing the life stories of three "born-again" artists, Van Nieuwkerk illustrated the passage from art to repentance and devotion. This transition has to be seen against the backdrop of a new trend in the religious revival in Egypt, concentrating on individual piety.

The last panel focused on women's ritual participation. Dorothea Schulz explained that since the introduction of a multiparty system and civil liberties in Mali in the 1990s, Muslim women's groups have entered the public arena. The women leading these groups exhort their followers to work on individual ethical improvement through ritual worship and the choice of "decent" attire, and present this process of personal transformation as a means and measurement of societal renewal. By emphasizing the relevance of Islamic ethics to public life, these Muslim women's associations assert that individual morality has important political implications.

Whereas Schulz focused on prayer and dress as markers of Muslim identity in Mali, Gerard van de Bruinhorst (ISIM) stressed the role of Islamic sacrifice in Tanzania. His paper studied the choice of sacrificial animals in relation to women's involvement in the *'aqiqa* (birth ritual) and *'Id al-adha* (the annual festival marking the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca). Whereas in the Islamic authoritative texts women's involvement in these sacrifices is described as marginal, the current reformist trend in Tanzania tries to include women as ritual agents. Although these reformists seem to advocate gender equality, Van de Bruinhorst concluded that their attempts actually result in a decrease of women's ritual agency compared with their roles in "traditional" society. The role of sacrificial animals seems to be emblematic for this development: the "traditional" female sheep gives way to the "Islamic" billy goat.

Finally, Samuli Schielke (University of Mainz) investigated the participation of women in Sufi saints-day festivals (*mulids*) in Egypt. Although there is a strong objection to mixed Sufi gatherings, Schielke argued that the problem is not actually with the presence of women at these Sufi festivals, but the kind of presence they have. This issue is not restricted to gender, but is also related to class distinctions. Despite the reformists' critique on women's participation in these festivals, Schielke's paper showed that they can command respect by displaying middle-class standards of piety in combination with matriarchal leadership and Sufi spirituality, while delegating formal symbols of religious leadership to their male followers.

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