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“Muslim women” in Europe:
Bodily performances, multiple belongings and the public sphere

directed by

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Workshop abstract

This workshop focuses on the heightened tensions between legal citizenship and cultural citizenship (national belonging) that Muslim women in Europe are confronted with. In the course of the last decade many European nation states have shifted their policies to a stronger assimilationist stance, while the general public has increasingly come to see Muslims as a threat to national security and Islam as incompatible with European values. In this context everyday performances of national belonging in several European countries have become ever more demanding. Women are particularly implicated not only because they are often seen as markers of communities but especially because their gender submission - symbolized by the headscarf as immediately visible sign - is taken as one of the hallmarks of this incompatibility. This workshop investigates what discursive and/or performative strategies Muslim women employ in the face of such shifts in state policy and public opinion. The premise is that both in the everyday performance of national belonging as well as in public debates the cultural politics of bodily appearances and of aesthetics count. This workshop, therefore, sets out to discuss the kinds of bodily performances Muslim women in various European nation-states engage in and the sorts of belonging they more or less consciously (want to) produce. The workshop invites papers based on in-depth research that focus on the diversity of strategies Muslims women have

developed during the last decade with respect to issues of cultural citizenship / practical national belonging.

Workshop description

“Muslim women” in Europe: Bodily performances, multiple belongings and the public sphere

This workshop focuses on the heightened tensions between legal citizenship and cultural citizenship (national belonging) that Muslim women in Europe are confronted with. In the course of the last decade many European nation states have shifted their policies to a stronger assimilationist stance, while the general public has increasingly come to see Muslims as a threat to national security and Islam as incompatible with European values. In this context everyday performances of national belonging have become ever more demanding. Women are particularly implicated not only because they are often seen as markers of communities but especially because their gender submission – symbolized by the headscarf as immediately visible sign - is taken as one of the hallmarks of this incompatibility. This workshop investigates what discursive and/or performative strategies Muslim women employ in the face of such shifts in state policy and public opinion. In doing so it takes into account policies of various nation states with respect to the presence of religion in the public, normative notions about gender relations and sexuality, and the historical trajectories of a Muslim presence (colonial, migratory, conversion).

Citizenship and national belonging: public debates and everyday performances

State policies have seen major shifts in the course of the last decade. While multiculturalism of some sort allowed for partially disconnecting citizenship from cultural belonging, present-day policies almost everywhere have taken on a much stronger assimilationist edge.

Debates on citizenship in Europe often focus on formal rights and duties held vis-à-vis the state. This, however, is too limited a notion to understand the presence, or rather the production of religious minorities in European nation-states. For such legal citizenship rights do not guarantee acceptance in everyday life as part of the national community by dominant groups (Hage 1998; Carruthers 2002). The gap between formal citizenship and (practical) national belonging seems to be particularly poignant in the case of Muslims in Europe, who have increasingly come to be perceived a threat to European values and state security (Theriault and Peter 2005). Such non-acceptance may, in turn, limit one's de facto access to the rights pertaining to citizenship. Increasingly migrants – many of whom are Muslims - need to prove their allegiance to the nation before being able to acquire rights of residence, let alone citizenship rights.

Women are particularly implicated in debates on citizenship and national belonging (Salih 2002; Amir-Moazami 2001; 2005). Whereas in some cases formal residency or citizenship rights discriminate de facto against women (as in the case of residency rights depending on marriage), women's bodily performances are crucial markers of national belonging and function as boundaries between communities of various sorts, such as those based on ethnic or religious belonging (Gole 1992). In the case of Muslim women such bodily performances – such as wearing headscarves and more generally forms of covered dress – are also taken as the visible proof of their gender subordination, and as such once more as an indication of the incompatibility of Islam with European

values as well as of the unwillingness of Muslims to assimilate and become truly part of European nation-states (Herrera and Moors 2003; Moors 2005b).

This workshop investigates the implications of the move towards assimilationist state policies for Muslim women's strategies, that may vary from strongly assimilationist (highlighting women's gender subordination within Muslim communities) to those demanding space for multiple belongings, including those that are transnational or subnational and pertain to the field of the religious (Salih 2004; Afshar et al 2005). In doing so it partially shifts the focus from formal citizenship rights to the meanings of cultural citizenship, as well as from public debates and state politics to the micro-politics of everyday life.

Religious belonging: a Muslim public sphere

If Muslim women are under increasing pressure to perform a national belonging that claims to be secular, how do they deal with religious belongings? In the course of the last decade it has been argued that a Muslim public sphere has developed that allows for a greater variety of participants, addresses more diverse publics, and has developed a wider range of interpretations. Whereas such a public sphere not only allows for critical engagements with those representing the nation-state but also with established Muslim authorities (Eickelman and Anderson 1999), the participatory promises of such a new Muslim public may have been overstated, as a critique of existing structure of authority engenders new forms of authority, and the inclusion of new participants excludes others (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003; Moors 2005a).

The notion of the public sphere, in Habermasian terms, starts from the assumption that communication is based on the rational exchange of ideas and opinions about issues of the common good by participants considered as equals in the debate. These participants are supposedly not hindered by attachment to particular interests or identities and only the power of rational argumentation is acknowledged. Yet it has been convincingly argued that the public sphere is, in fact, an arena for the formation and enactment of social identities and interests (Fraser 1992; Calhoun 1992). This asks for a more all-encompassing 'politics of presence' that allows for the inclusion of non-verbal modes of communication (Moors 2005a), such as bodily comportment, appearance, dressing styles and styles of speaking, rather than only its substance. Hence, this workshop shifts the focus from deliberation and a discursive presence to also include the embodied, physical presence of participants in the public. Similar to the importance of a successful social performance of national belonging for the realization of citizenship rights, an embodied presence is important to be able to position oneself in a position of authority in the public. In other words, both in the everyday performance of national belonging as well as in public debates the cultural politics of bodily appearances count.

Embodied belongings in different contexts

Everyday performances of national belonging often center on the body, as has been highlighted by authors working with concepts such as 'techniques of the self' (Mauss 1973), 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1977) and 'reiterative performances' (Butler 1997). A discussion on bodily appearances and embodied presence includes aesthetical styles and brings in the senses. Sight or vision (dress, make-up, jewelry, tattoos) is crucially important (Tarlo 2005; Moors 1998), but also sound (language spoken with all its small nuances), and smell (foods eaten, perfumes used) need to be taken into account. On the one hand the various ways of adorning the body are important and this is the more so as identities are becoming increasingly commodified (Navaro-Yashin 2002). Such processes of

commodification are, for instance, evident in the shift from more austere styles of Islamic dress to the emergence of Islamic fashion (Sandikci and Ger 2005). Yet also the ways in which persons use their body, wear items of dress, speak and more generally present themselves through ‘body language’ are all part of a more or less conscious performance of belonging, be it national, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation or whatever (Butler 1997; Najmabadi 1993). This highlights that an investigation of everyday embodied politics of belonging needs to include aesthetics (Sandikci and Ger 2005).

While some of these embodied performances are volatile and contingent (such as fashion), others (such as skin color) are far more difficult to do and undo and need a lot more performative work. Also, whether particular forms of embodied presence can be ‘undone’ is subject to interpretation. While state policies assume that wearing a headscarf is not more than a form of identity politics, similar to wearing a Christian cross, for some Muslim women it is a religious obligation and a technique that transforms the self (Mahmood 2005). Furthermore, some transformations of the body can be more or less drastic, radical and invasive, including such varied practices as cosmetic surgery, hyphen repair, and cliterodectomy.

This workshop sets out to discuss the kinds of bodily performances Muslim women in various European nation-states engage in and the sorts of belonging they more or less consciously (want to) produce. While national, religious and ethnic belongings are obviously key notions, these are always inflected by a host of other forms of belonging, such as class, location, generation and so on. Furthermore religious belonging in itself can be performed in widely divergent ways, depending for instance on which form of Islam – liberal, conservative, radical etc. - one (or one’s social circle) is affiliated with (Salih 2002). And such performances may also be directed and adapted towards different audiences (the general public, or ethnic/religious subpublics, for instance) depending upon contexts of time and place. Neither are such performances necessarily successful as interpretations may vary. Whereas the general public may consider wearing a headscarf as proof of Muslim women’s subordination and evidence of the incompatibility of Islam and European values, Muslim women themselves may use arguments such as freedom of religion / expression to be allowed to cover their heads. This also points to another possible strategy, that is a discursive strategy that denies the relevance of bodily performances.

The workshop invites papers based on in-depth research that focus on the diversity of more and less conscious strategies Muslims women have developed during the last decade with respect to issues of cultural citizenship / practical national belonging. This includes questions such as:

- What are the specific practices Muslim women have engaged, how are these interpreted by various participants and publics concerned?
- How are particular forms and styles of presence in the public related to ideological positions and forms of organization with respect to national belonging, religion and gender (e.g. liberal-secularist, Islamic feminist etc)
- Are "Muslim women" engaged in conflicting and clashing bodily performances that bring to surface generational, ideological, class, and political differences amongst them?
- What are the relations between discursive (e.g. public debate) and performative (e.g. embodied appearances) forms of belonging?
- Are there other, alternative embodied practices (different from veiling) that Muslim women engage with to get visibility in the public spheres? (e.g. engagement in civil society organizations, marches, demonstrations, boutiques, pictures, video- production)

- What aesthetics (such as in the case of Islamic fashion, anti-fashion, or very revealing styles of dress) are employed to undergrid particular (micro-)political positions?
- How are these practices positioned in fields of power? Which ones have become authoritative and which ones have become devalued within various settings?
- How have these strategies been influenced by the cultural politics of various nation states (with respect to e.g. religion in the public, ethnicity, gender and sexuality)?
- What has been the impact of the particularities of the Muslim presence in specific national context (colonial, labour migration, conversion) and concomitant transnational / subnational forms of belonging?
- What shifts have taken place in the evaluation of particular styles of belonging, and the inclusion / exclusion of particular participants (e.g. along lines of gender, class, ethnicity, generation, education) both in society at large and within particular communities?

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Directors' individual paper abstracts

Islam and political cultures in Europe: Gender, techniques of self and commodification of identities

Ruba Salih

The process of "othering" Muslims has often revolved around women's bodies as signs and symbols of the "backward" nature of Muslim colonized societies, and were used to self legitimize colonial enterprises as civilizing missions (Yegenoglu 1998, Ahmed 1992).

On the other hand, historically, the control of women's bodies, through the imposition of specific dress codes, behaviour and, most importantly, legal rules has been central in delimiting the boundaries and borders of religious communities. Currently, major point of cultural cleavages in Europe still revolve around the control and disciplining of women's bodies, as the headscarf affairs in several European countries have shown. Muslim women's body techniques and participation in the public sphere contribute to destabilize common perceptions deployed in Europe around emancipation – oppression, visibility-invisibility, religiosity and secularity, public- private. This paper will investigate the different meanings and understandings of these notions by women belonging to different political cultures within Islam, and the ways this ties in with the commodification of the expression of identities. Moreover, it will analyse the extent to which gendered representations of the female bodies as central locus of the definition of religiosity and secularity are being challenged by the emergence of alternative discourses and practices (other than veiling for example) amongst Muslim women in Europe. A further aim of this paper will be to unfold the tensions between feminist, religious and multicultural narratives and practices and contextualize them in a transnational framework.

The emergence of an Islamic fashion sector in the Netherlands: What does it mean?

Annelies Moors

While the emergence of Islamic fashion and its complex meanings in the Middle East have been the focus of research, studies on Muslim women's appearance in the public sphere in Europe have by and large remained limited to debates on headscarf and veiling as a sign of Muslim women's subordination and their lack of integration in Europe. This paper, in contrast, deals with the emergence of *Islamic fashion in Europe*.

Whereas for some Muslims, Islam ought to remain far removed from such mundane and wasteful concerns as fashion, in everyday life the presence of a large number of producers, designers and women wearing fashionable Islamic dress, indicates that many actors in the field do not find it problematic to combine Islam and fashion. This is further stimulated by the proliferation of media for propagating and marketing Islamic fashion, in particular the Internet. Taking the Netherlands as case study, this paper traces developments in the production and distribution of fashionable Islamic dress as part of a transnational field.