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Everyday Islam for Childless Women in Northwestern Turkey

Panel: Gendering 'everyday Islam'

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Religious practices and conversations about religion comprised a major part of quotidian activities in the two villages in northwestern Turkey - where I conducted my research about childlessness. Men's and women's everyday interaction with Islam dominated their ways of thinking, acting and especially socializing. This paper discusses the significance of everyday Islam as a gendered locus for socialization.

This paper explores the ways in which the Koran and the *Hadith* (a collection of sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed) as discursive resources of Islam influence the power relations and everyday practices. In so doing, the paper argues against any mutual exclusion between normative practices or discourse and everyday Islam. In response to Fadil and Fernando's (2015) distinction of piety and everyday practices in studies of everyday Islam, Deeb (2015: 95) argues: "Normative religiosity, moral norms and everyday life infuse one another; they must be understood together." This approach presents the theoretical stance of this paper. As will be seen later in the paper, people in my research field frequently invoked canonical texts and the *Hadith* to authorize their everyday practices.

The paper is based on my doctoral research conducted in 2006-2007, which explored Turkish women's experience of childlessness and the demand for IVF. The first part of the fieldwork was undertaken in two IVF clinics, one in Istanbul and the other on the outskirts of Istanbul. I explored IVF-seeking women's reasons for wanting a child and their experiences with being involuntarily childless. For the second part of the research, I resided in two neighboring villages that were about three hours from Istanbul by car: village Dere (Stream) and village

Tepe (hill). In the villages, I was able to befriend childless women, which helped me observe the implications of childlessness in the context of social relationships. This was crucial for understanding why people go for an IVF, for social relationships impinge upon the experience of childlessness greatly (Inhorn 1996).

In this first part of the paper, I dwell on everyday Islam as a gendered locus for socialization in the lives of Turkish women I met during my research in the two villages. In the next part of the paper, I will explore the influence of Islamic discourse and norms on everyday lives of the same people.

Religious practices permeated almost every moment of the daily lives of women in the villages Dere and Tepe. A day most commonly started by performing the first of the five compulsory prayers (*namaz*/ *salat*). Then my friends in village Tepe would go to the mosque in their neighborhood in order to learn how to read the Koranic script (it is Arabic, a language they did not speak). After the Koran course, they would be busy with domestic and garden chores for a few hours. In the afternoon, they used to meet together and practice their reading the Koran. They would sometimes dedicate an hour daily or more to pray (in addition to the *namaz* prayer/ *salat*). During the holy Ramadan month, when they all fasted, religious activities peaked. The women were coming together in each other's houses and in mosques to read the Koran or to listen to the *imam* (prayer leader) reading the Koran and preaching Islamic morals.

Reading the Koran was a common way to socialize for women. In village Dere, I witnessed a ritual called baby *mevlü*t, hosted by the mother and mother-in-law of a newborn baby. *Mevlü*t is a poem from the fourteenth or fifteenth century about the birth of the Prophet Muhammed that praises him. Women from the village came together in the baby's house, to celebrate the baby's arrival while reading the Koran, chanting the *mevlü*t as well as eating and chatting. More common than chanting the *mevlüt* for a baby, is chanting the *mevlüt* after a deceased person for his soul. Usually 7 days and 40 days after someone passed away, women and men gathered together in the deceased person's house to listen to a *hodja* reading the Koran and chanting the *mevlüt*.

Incidents such as birth or death are not crucial for social gatherings involving the reading of the Koran. Women in both Dere and Tepe commonly organized a money saving event called *gün* (literally: day), which happened every fortnight or once a month in a woman's house. *Gün* gatherings are quite common all over Turkey. In these gatherings, from anywhere from 5 to 20 women usually, bring a certain amount of money or gold coin to the host who gives out lunch and desert to her guests. The women read the Koran (for 20 minutes or so, during the ones I witnessed), eat and socialize during these gatherings. Reading the Koran is not an essential part of a *gün* gathering everywhere in Turkey; women can gather for just collecting money and for socializing. However, in villages Dere and Tepe, reading the Koran was indispensable.

Fadil and Fernando (2015) in a recent essay published in HAU, were critical toward the studies on everyday Islam which typically positioned themselves against Asad's (1986) framework of religion as an evolving discursive tradition. I argue that an investigation of everyday Islam does not necessarily rebuff the study of religion as a discursive tradition. This part of the paper will show the ways in which doctrinal discourse can be an influential part of everyday life in the two villages where I conducted my research.

According to Asad (1986: 14):

> If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Koran and the Hadith.

This framework for an anthropology of Islam drawn by Asad was relevant to my research field, where people typically made a reference to the Koran and the Hadith to explain their preferences, actions and opinions. They would not only act during the day according to what was justified by the Koran and the *Hadith*, but they were also quite verbal about the discursive sources of their actions.

The childless women in the village Tepe usually invoked the following *sura* (a section from the Koran) from the Koran to explain to others that infertility was a problem given by God, so any

negative judgment and any scorn regarding their infertility was akin to questioning God's deeds.

> Allah's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth; He creates what He pleases; He grants to whom He pleases daughters and grants to whom He pleases sons. Or He makes them of both sorts, male and female; and He makes whom He pleases barren; surely He is the Knowing, the Powerful (42,sura [Council]: 49–50)

These childless women also maintained hope for a child no matter how many years they suffered as a childless woman. Miracles were expected based on the miracles they knew from the Koran as well as based on the miracles they witnessed in their social networks such as someone having a child after 20 years. It was common to come upon people who told the story of a woman who had a miracle child, beating all the odds. One of the women I knew in Dere, told me she had her first child after 16 involuntarily childless years. She told me she suffered a lot during those 16 years such as feeling ostracized and staying away from social interactions with others. She said her baby "arrived" just like a miracle when she had stopped trying to have a baby. Miracle was indeed a common discourse to maintain hope for a child. On a website called I want a child.com (cocukistiyorum.com) mostly dedicated to supporting childless women going for an IVF treatment, women share their "miracle baby" stories. In these stories, the miracle is never attributed to the assisted reproductive technology or to science or to the infertility physicians. It is always thanks to God, when the baby "arrives" - just like a miracle - right after a failed IVF treatment or just before starting a treatment. The word miracle, religiously loaded, always denotes God's deed.

In the Koran, there are stories of miracle birth stories, which were often referred to by the childless women I knew in the villages. One of these stories is the story of Zekeriya whose prayers for a child were granted with a son. In the *sura Zariyat*, Abraham is given the news of a son from his barren wife (51: 28–30). Another miracle baby is the story of the birth of Jesus Christ (Demircioğlu Göknar, 2015: 77-78).

Suras from the Koran were not always invoked to maintain hope as in the miracle stories or to explain the reason for one's childlessness as in the *sura* about infertility. They were also used to serve patriarchal interests by men such as limiting women's mobility, or perpetuating women's dependence on men on many levels such as asking for permission to work. The pertinent *sura* most commonly referred to is the *Nisa* (woman) *sura*. Here is an excerpt:

Men protect and take care of women. This is because Allah created
some people superior to others. Men provide the means of livelihood.
Good women are obedient (34, sura [Nisa]).

Kerime, a childless friend from village Tepe and her two neighbors recited this part of the *sura*, when I insisted that we visit a new physician by ourselves, just Kerime and me. That day, I had asked Kerime's husband about visiting a new physician, and he had plainly rejected the idea. When I insisted a bit, he finally seemed to give in, by allowing his wife to go to the doctor with me. My excitement was short-lived, as I was told by Kerime and her two neighbors that two women could never travel alone. One of those neighbors was trying to put her infant to sleep on her lap, a very typical method to put babies to sleep in Turkey. She told me:

You think men and women are equal and can do the same things.
That is a false idea. Men are created stronger to protect us. And since
they are stronger, we need men to protect us from men. Women are
weak but they are more compassionate. Can you think of a man who
can make this kid sleep like me? (Demircioğlu Göknar, 2015:87)

Kerime, seeing that she could not convince me of men's superiority, suggested that I go to the sermon with her the next day. Sermons were a very recent phenomenon in these villages where women started to refer to the discursive sources of Islam in all manners of their quotidian lives.

I find that an investigation of everyday practices are as equally important as studying piety. I have shown in this paper that studying everyday Islam and piety are not mutually exclusive. As Deeb (2015: 96) states: "Moral norms and everyday practices are constituted in relation to

one another, which means that their coproduction works *in both directions*. In other words, scholarship could push forward and highlight both how everyday is shaped by religious discipline and normativity *and* how religious discipline and normativity are themselves produced through and change via everyday social life."

This paper has also revealed the significance of everyday Islam as a gendered locus for socialization in the two villages where I did my fieldwork. In the lives of the women, anything pertaining to socialization involved a religious act such as reading the Koran in social gatherings, or reciting prayers before any undertaking.

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