

Rooms of Their Own. Old Rituals in New Settings

Women between Sufism and Islamic Activism in Contemporary Istanbul

This paper will deal with how rituals, deeply rooted in local tradition, can be used to legitimize new forms of activism in complex modern societies. The empirical material comes from fieldwork in Istanbul, where I have studied a small Muslim women's group over a period of four years. The women have organized their activities in the form of a religious foundation, *vakıf*, offering regular prayer meetings and basic religious education to other women in the vicinity. The women's use of the term *vakıf* comprises both the formal organisation and the meeting place as such. The weekly performance of the repetitive and intense *zikir*-prayer constitutes the core of activities and the teachings of the leading women and their theology is clearly based on sufi, *tasavvuf*, thought. They identify themselves as the keepers of sufi traditions, but without any formal connection to any established order, *tarikât*. Many of the formal aspects of their religious life follow established patterns, but the social and cultural setting in the megacity of Istanbul is a novelty. From the conditions of modern urban life follows a wider complexity in individual intention and interpretation of the rituals.

There is a tendency in mainstream Turkish discourse to regard Muslim women as keepers of a "cultural heritage", instead of seeing them as actively and consciously challenging the definitions of — and points of access to — modernity. The impact of modern living conditions on individual women's lives, that at the first glance from a foreigner seem so "traditional", is very apparent. Today, there are sufficient numbers of well-educated women in Turkey to enable them to negotiate and claim a religious understanding of what modernity should entail. Rapid changes have precipitated the establishment of new discursive traditions in local religious life (Asad 1986).

In the milieu where I have conducted my study, an intricate interplay between what is given by "tradition" and the demands of modern society can be noted at several levels of action. In this essay, I would like to stress the way in which the consequences of the normative spatial separation between men and women is crucial in two ways in relation to the given theme of this conference. The normative separation has direct methodological impact on the conditions of how the fieldwork was planned and directed, as well as how it has affected the theoretical understanding of the construction and legitimacy of performed rituals. The focal point of this discussion will be the understanding of power.

The gendered nature of fieldwork

When encountering Muslim communities as a fieldworker, the relation between gender and access to data and space is apparent. It would simply be unthinkable for a man to conduct the fieldwork I have done. The rooms of the *vakf* are open exclusively to women. Even when necessary for practical reasons, e.g. to allow male workers to enter the premises to carry out maintenance, male presence causes considerable turbulence and the rooms in question are quickly cleared out—not only of women, but also of all their personal belongings. In a few minutes attempts are made to make the room "gender neutral". The women accept seeing, but not being seen.

But being a woman is certainly not a sufficient criterion when approaching a group like this. Nor is it meaningful to claim any essentialistic view of womanhood and expect "women's experiences" to be shared over cultural boundaries. On the contrary, the issue of differences has been at the core of many of our conversations. To me these moments have been some of the most valuable parts of the process of collecting data. In the midst of busy activities in the crowded *vakf*, we have had some quiet time of reflections over the varying conditions of female human beings, inside and outside Turkey. At its best, this could be described as a critical dialogue. References to "faith" and statements like "only a Muslim can fully understand" became progressively more rare as the fieldwork proceeded. The activities of the group were never surrounded by any secrecy, and I have always been welcome to join the women, on mutually negotiated conditions.

Nevertheless, as a Scandinavian woman I still represent "the West": why do I pay interest in their rituals when I am not a Muslim? From the beginning, I have tried hard openly to declare my intentions with the study, never pretending to be a potential convert.

Instead of trying to become invisible and "melt in", I have attempted not to hide my purpose, and instead try to be what I in fact am: a temporary guest intending to write a book about the women. It can never be denied: they are the objects of my study. According to my view acceptance of this fact is not a hinderance to conducting qualitative interviews. Quite the opposite, this circumstance has developed a relaxed relation, based on interest in difference from both parts, in a study completely dependent on cooperation with the group. My fieldwork has been carried on during several long periods of participation, sharing everyday life as well as major events such as religious and national holidays, public fund-raising meetings, memorial days of the *vakf* etc.

If, when experiencing the many dilemmas of fieldwork, one looks for advice in the anthropological debates of the last decade the waters are even deeper. With few exceptions, critique of the production of knowledge, rather than the art of fieldwork, has dominated the debate (Moore 1995, 1996). The postmodern emphasis has been on the problem of production of the text "at home", discussing position, location and representativity.

One of the most fruitful attempts to deal with issues of gender and anthropological representation is Lila Abu-Lughod's introduction to *Writing women's worlds* (1992), where she combines her insights in local knowledge with the theoretical understandings of the academia. She writes at length about the "set of theoretical concerns about the politics of representation" (1992: 7). Rather than turning it into a question of the anthropologist's self, Abu-Lughod approaches the problem as issues of ideology.

In an attempt to avoid petrified images and simplistic explanations, the dialogic nature of fieldwork has been stressed over and over again, as discussed some ten years ago by James Clifford: "Understood literally, participant observation is a paradoxical, misleading formula, but it may be taken seriously if reformulated in hermeneutic terms as a dialectic of experience and interpretation" (1988: 34). Initially this was a most needed discussion and critique of naive empiricism, but in some cases the outcome ended in a blind alley of self-reflexivity. However, longterm fieldwork in a more or less limited location is highly dependent on certain strategical events: through what person is the researcher introduced, what networks does the introducer belong to, his/her own loyalties and controversies? After the initial period of mutual interest, the premisses of the study are often shaken, in one way or the other, by incidents that illuminate constallations that were invisible to the fieldworker in the beginning. Although flustering, the process through which these re-

lations are revealed is often one of the keys to a deeper understanding of the field studied.

Fieldwork is as much a provoked situation as a provocative one. Power and power differences work reciprocally and two aspects of the dilemma will be emphasized here. The relationship between the fieldworker and the field itself is an ambiguous matter. Kirsten Hastrup has discussed how female anthropologists have not always been identified as “woman” among the local women, but instead have been categorized as a third gender, a new fieldwork identity, a category of its own. Many studies are witness of the pressures on the fieldworker to conform to local gender norms, and how female researchers are forced to submit to radical changes in dress and behaviour. This has never been the case for me in the present study¹. I cover my head at the *vakıf* when the women pray and when we visit mosques together. In an urban environment such as Istanbul there is enough social space for an uncovered female academic to dwell among covered women. This freedom for me in a most islamistic milieu is part of the same structural changes that have exposed new fora for religiously active women.

More crucial in relation to my work has been the discussion of power relations connected to the authority of ethnographic description, and the awareness of how knowledge is always situated—and thereby gendered (Haraway 1988). This, however, is accepted only with Henrietta Moore’s warning ringing in my ear: “There is a particular danger in discussing situated knowledges: in acknowledging the importance of alterity and diffraction in their constitution and conceptualization, one slips too easily into an unthought dialectic of opposition which is the negativity of difference” (1996: 6). Power and unequal relations in a fieldwork are particularly overt when studying marginalized or poor people, and have been a great concern in anthropological debate. Solidarity work with a politically sensitive attitude has been an important part in the development of feminism as a political strategy as well as the academic construction of gender the-

¹ Nevertheless, during my preliminary fieldwork among members of an established sufi order I had experiences similar to Hastrup’s (Hastrup 1992). Except for prayer, I was invited to stay in the men’s part of the lodge but my interest in the activities of the women was not always appreciated. In these encounters I experienced that I was defined not only in a third gender, but also a third sex, since the rules of spatial separation were overturned. I was urged to take the most honourable seat during the dinners: next or close to the *şeyh* himself in this entirely male room. Therefore my relation to the women upstairs was fragmentary and filtered from the beginning.

ory as an analytical tool. Feminists and gender-oriented researchers have attempted to develop more qualitative fieldwork along with experiments in "empowering methods" of representing their analyses (Wolf 1995: 25 f). Voicing has been one of the key-terms and seen as the bridge between political struggle and theorizing. "My wish to listen to others is not simply a kind of liberal impulse to listen to everyone. Rather, it is to contribute to a creation of a theory which is not blind to difference" Morwenna Griffiths writes in *Feminisms and the self* (1995: 32). In these emancipatory projects, the loyal attitude was for a long time frequent in feminist anthropology "for the [feminist] ethnographer that means being aware of domination in the society being described and in the relationship between the writer (and readers) and the people being written about" (Abu-Lughod 1993: 5). To some extent the answer to many of the critical questions raised, has been attempts to write from the inside, dangerously close to essentialism. Kirin Narayan, herself an "insider", has forcefully argued that neither inside nor outside can compensate the "quality of relations" and long term field studies (1993: 671). Furthermore she sensitively remarks that the very conviction of the existence of insiders and outsiders rests on the conception of "us" and "them" and the gap between. The post-structuralist critique has questioned simplifying political solutions, signifying a shift from a wish to change the world to a discussion of the construction of worlds where either-or is replaced by both-and.

The extensive focus on representation is likewise met by other forms of severe criticism. Karla Poewe writes: "Fieldwork assumes a metonymic structure, when it is experienced by the anthropologist as the actualization of the cultural schema or 'the world' of the other in the anthropologist's life and world view through a series of happenings" (1993: 193). She distinguishes between two types of ethnographies: experimental (focusing on language and text) and experiential (the anthropologist's self as a source) and expresses her fear of what will come out of the blurred metonymic link between observable reality and the analytical text.

Every fieldwork is a unique situation based on an interplay between closeness and distance. All of us who have been involved in fieldwork know that there are a number of problems relating to responsibility and respect. The problem goes in two directions: respect towards the people from whom we are learning and clarity towards the academic reader, as stressed by Lila Abu-Lughod in her intention to "write against culture" (1992: 6ff). Her position is a theoretical stand against cultural essentialism as well as against cultural relativism. By means of giving us individual women's full-length stories,

Abu-Lughod avoids generalizations by organizing them in categories known to the academic reader. Because of this way of telling, her book is neither a collection of short-stories nor a stereotype, but a thorough analysis of differences between women in a relatively small community. The living conditions are to a high extent shared, but the individual interpretations of the hardships of life differ.

Doing fieldwork on rituals draws us closer to some central questions about representation and positionality. Is it necessary to join a ritual to be able to give a full-fledged account and analysis of it? Is the only alternative being a cold-eyed observer who documents quantitative data through every possible technical medium?

Rituals and power

For the women of the *vakf* keeping up the given gender roles, especially the covering of the female body, is the major icon of loyalty to the larger Muslim community. At the same time “decent cloths”, *tesettür*, is a public demonstration of resistance against mainstream secular society. The rhetorical striving for modesty (*adep*) has developed as the foremost method of gaining legitimacy to form alternatives to conventional religious life. When encountering the women in Istanbul, I have been puzzled by the question: how do they accomplish the balance between the religious demands of modesty (with which they fully agree) and their desire to participate in public activities? I discovered early on during my visits to the group that the joint rituals played a crucial part. Not only inside the group, for the formation of identity and unity, but also externally: in negotiations with Muslim authorities and in the self-presentation of the group. The women favour the rules of restricted behaviour as well as they establish their own restrictions against outside involvement in their group.

There is a growing academic interest in rituals situated in more or less post-modern conditions. Much of the scholarly concern emanates from the experience of the limitations of textual hermeneutics when trying to understand religious practices in late modern societies.

Rituals can fulfill many vital functions within a community as they are communicative and important ways of transmitting tradition and local history. Oral traditions and recited written texts (like songs, prayers and legends) are integrated in the rituals of the *vakf*. This kind of local knowledge is to a high extent embodied and activated through the physical expressions of rituals; “the constitutive power which is granted to ordinary language lies not in the language itself

but in the group which authorizes it and invests it with authority" (Bourdieu 1977: 21). Hereby rituals give people tools to interpret events and experiences. Rituals are also in many respects emotional and existential. Consequently, they are highly dependent on individual intention and the distinctive uses of symbols. David Kertzer states: "symbols provide the content of ritual /---/ Three properties of symbols are especially important; condensation of meaning, multivocality, and ambiguity" (1988: 11). Regular ritual activities evidently have social dimensions, and especially when studied in an urban setting it is obvious how they offer opportunities to establish networks in the "urban swirl" (Hannerz 1992).

In everyday language the word ritual is often associated with something distant from regular life, with an air of the extraordinary. This view contrasts with that of some anthropologists who tell us that most things we do regularly are rituals. It is not my intention here to solve the contradictions or offer a general definition of ritual, but I would like to point at the fact that there are several important issues to consider before using the term ritual as an analytical category. The criteria for definition and the ideological background and implications of these principles must be considered.

To begin with, the difference between regularized behaviour and ritualization is decisive. Both modes of action are important for the organization of everyday life as Catherine Bell writes: "cultural and situational forms of ritualization are strategies in the repertoire of any moderately socialized person, and one of the most basic of these strategies concerns the degree of ritualization used to distinguish or blur activities" (1992: 206). Although regular, habits do not create meaning by necessity as ritualization does. Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw have taken up Bell's term ritualization and discuss it further in terms of "a qualitative departure from normal intentional character of human action" (1994: 89). Expressions of ritual experience are many times surprisingly homogenous which makes it tempting to use universalistic explanations. It must be remembered that ritual actions are surrounded by given forms, tools and genres that constitute socially and culturally defined procedures, structured by prescription (Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994).

Personally I am more attracted to broad understandings that do not exclude non-religious rituals. This is not only because my present fieldwork has political implications, but because of the more general problem: where to draw an absolute line if religious life is limited to the realm of the holy? I know from my own material that a specific ritual event, viewed in its full dimensions, is performed in a borderland between what must be considered religious, social as well as po-

litical. Therefore, I want to argue for avoiding transcendental criteria when defining ritual, as has been done by a number of scholars. However, this should not be read as if I deny that there are very important religious aspects of many ritual activities, but I do not think that they should not be used as criteria when outlining what rituals are. To me discussions of people's experiences and expressions of transcendental dimension belong to the results of the analysis, not to the alpha of the definition.

In his book *How societies remember* Paul Connerton uses a very broad definition of ritual, which I have found useful when analysing the rituals in my material. According to Connerton, a ritual is: "a rule-governed activity of a symbolic character, which draws the attention of the participants to objects of thought and feeling, which they hold to be of special significance" (1989: 44).

I would like especially to stress three advantages with Connerton's way of reasoning. First, this definition does not differentiate between various types of rituals, which minimizes the risk that the analysis stops at classification. Secondly, it does not emphasize any difference between religious, political or social rituals. Hereby, the durkheimian distinction between the sacred and the profane is in fact invalidated and more or less rendered meaningless. And when reviewing observations from performed rituals, I consider these aspects not as separate activities, but simultaneously existing qualities in lived lives. Finally, it must also be stressed that Connerton's definition in a most sound way questions the stable form/content distinction. What to the observer is form, ready for classification, is in many cases content to the performer: What is pure form and what is sole content in a *zikir*-ritual?

David Kertzer emphasises the political aspects even more when he provocatively writes in *Ritual, politics and power*: "What is important about rituals, then, is not that they deal with supernatural beings, but rather that they provide a powerful way in which people's social dependence can be expressed" and continues "Paradoxically, it is the very conservatism of ritual forms that can make ritual a potent force in political change" (1988: 9, 12). For the women in the Islamic movement claiming tradition is a forceful way of acting modern.

To return to Connerton's four criteria and apply them very briefly to the *zikir*-ritual performed by the women in Istanbul, it can be noted that their ceremony is certainly a rule-governed activity. It is regulated by tradition and has unchangeably forms of expression. Because of the spiritual hierarchies in the group, knowledge of the rules as well as acceptable innovations are transmitted from the prayer leader to disciples. The rules, however, must not be under-

stood as absolutely stable categories. To avoid solely synchronic analysis and not neglect changes between different ritual events and the influence of surrounding forces and dynamics, negotiations within the group must be stressed. History, in long and short perspective, influences the development of the ritual form. How the participants understand membership in the group is directly connected to how they relate themselves to sufi legendary history and contemporary social change.

Zikir-ceremonies are activities of a symbolic character. They involve an extensive use of symbols. Just to mention a few: Symbols are used to define the room appropriate for *zikir*-prayer, and mark it as a room appropriate for women to pray in. The clothes of the participating women during the ceremonies, all white, mark unity and purity. Some of the dresses are bought in Mecca, connecting their spiritual centre (spatially and ritually) with the absolute centre of the Muslim *Ümmüt*. The strong symbolism is also used at a discursive level. The symbols used in songs sung, prayers and legends read, give the ceremony a distinct start and a distinct finale. In a manner of speaking, the symbols open and close the ritual room as well as marking different parts of the ceremony.

The joint bodily movements and the symbols draw, with Conner-ton's terminology, the attention of the participants to objects of thought and feeling. The repeated divine names and the songs with their suggestive rhythmical choruses evoke both knowledge and emotion. The rhythm is a collective framework under the strict control of the prayer leader. Hymns, *ilahiler*, are sung to praise the *hoca* (preacher, teacher) of the group who passed away some years ago. His unselfish commitments, his humbleness and loyalty to Muslim values are emphasized as ideals for the members to follow. The *hoca* was never the leader of any distinct group and the *vakıf* was founded four years after his death. But the memory of him and notes from his sermons and conversations (*sohbetler*) are trusted within the group. References to the life and words of the well-known *hoca* give legitimacy to the *vakıf* in relation to the surrounding local Muslim community. Thereby, the symbols work as a unifying factor and reinforce the process of creating meaning within the group. Finally, there is the special significance established among the praying women. Participation creates loyalty with the group despite the variations in individual intention. It is within this field that new interpretations of traditions emerge. Among the well-educated young women of the *vakıf* there is capacity and knowledge enough to formulate interpretations, *içtihat*, solidly based in their own reading of the Quran and the hadiths.

The women stress individual experience and spiritual development as the objective of their *zikir*-ritual. At the same time, I have observed a delicate interplay between individual participants and the group as a collective. Early on in my fieldwork I intended to make an analysis of one unique performance, comparable to ethnographic biographies of individual persons, with great emphasis on the details of the particular moment. But instead of studying one specific performance, my strategy has been to view the observed rituals as a strain of events. I have aimed at exposing regularities and change over a longer period, as well as analysing how a sense of continuity is created within the group during this time—not to accomplish any “standardization” of the *zikir* prayer, but to discern the importance of variation in ritual practice and discursive changes.

Islamic rituals can of course be seen from many angles, but in this context I would like to stress the political aspects, i.e. women’s activism inside and outside their *vakıf*. Political Islam is often reduced to a question of ideas and social mobilization, limited to discursive analyses. Nevertheless, attention could be drawn to the fact that there are ritual aspects of the appearance of Islam as a political factor, that could be designated the habitus of Islamism. A conflict between sufi groups and Islamism is sometimes emphasized in a way that is not relevant when discussing the situation in Turkey. Islamism in a broad sense is a critique of programmatic kemalist secularisation campaigns and the various groups share the conviction that a better society can be built on Islamic values, united by a vague, but stubborn anti-westernism. But the “return” to religion or the new visibility also include increasing activities in the sufi groups, often with a flavour of being a genuine form of Turkish Islam. The orders form, alongside of the Islamistic Refah Partisi, some of the most important networks for Islamic political work.

In Catherine Bell’s discussion, power is a key concept for the understanding of rituals. When defining ritualization, she follows, in a critical manner, the distinctions made by Michel Foucault: “a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations” and she continues by asking “Why and when is ritualization an appropriate and effective way of acting?” (Bell 1992: 197) A group such as the women’s *vakıf* has limited access to public fora, even in the local district. The only possibility was to act from a room of their own, constituted by their ritual activities. Well knowing “that it is ritual and sanctioned practice that is prior and creates ‘Muslim space’” (Metcalf 1996: 3).

Gendered space

Space is made holy and exceptional through ritual. Space is never “empty”, even in absence of tangible objects it is always full of meaning, and is defined simultaneously at many levels. The rooms of the *vakıf* in an ordinary flat are readable for every visitor and the interpretation is dependent on her/his relation to local knowledge. Ideologically, the members’ stress on normative rules and practices of purity tell that the *vakıf* is proper, *helal*, and therefore a woman’s place. At the social level the rooms signal that trustworthy keepers of *adeb* and *tesettür* dwell here. The women of the *vakıf* only uncover in company with women they know and there is a strict control over who passes the threshold. *Helal* is marked in other ways too: special slippers are used in the bathroom, outdoor shoes are left on the staircase — even a visitor (secular or non-Muslim) unaccustomed to these practices can notice how the merging of inside/outside and pure/impure is thoroughly avoided. In unambiguously proper rooms the women move and act on quite other premisses than in public space. The *vakıf* constitutes an extended “domestic” space, an equivalent to the *haramlık*, women’s quarters, of an *osmanlı* household. In the *vakıf* women are in charge of every aspect of life. Finally, at a sensory level the women’s meeting-place is connected with sights and sounds (*kible* towards Mecca, calligraphy, songs, recitation from the Quran) that connote what is locally conceived as traditional values.

By giving this essay the title “Rooms of their own” it was my ambition to emphasize the intense work carried out in Muslim women’s groups to claim spatial platforms for their engagement. Many pious groups in contemporary Istanbul are conscious of the problems acting as women in a male-dominated community. During the last decade new rooms for community work and local politics have opened up in a very concrete meaning. New forms of small scale organisations have appeared in most urban areas of Turkey. The development of far-reaching non-governmental organizations (NGO:s) is found in religious as well as political communities. Their common feature is mobilisation and formalisation of activism under limited state control (Göle 1996b; Toprak 1996). Although their direct political power is circumscribed, the NGO:s seek political and social influence in local politics and primarily direct their ambitions toward practical problems. A significant component of “Islam’s new visibility” in Turkish society comes from the results of the energetic Islamic NGO:s. Most of these small organisations are constructed as foundations, *vakıflar*, which give them public recognition and a structured economy with

possibilities to accumulate capital for sizeable projects. The scale of the charity work is impressive and knowledge of local conditions has made it very effective. Needless to say in the wake of the neo-liberalism of the 80's the replacement of communal responsibilities in general have had political consequences in favour of Islamistic policy making.

When discussing transition and change in practice in the political life of Turkey, a comparison can be made with diasporic Muslim communities in Europe and North America. Barbara Metcalf has noted three characteristics that correspond to the struggle for a Muslim modernity in Turkey (1996: 7ff). First Metcalf mentions an apparent "objectification" which "entails self-examination, judging others and judging oneself". In their educational programmes the women in my study spend a considerable amount of time on quranic interpretations of recent events, local or global. There is also greater concern with Islamic practice and a new interest in normative discourse. Together with "health issues" expositions of moral conduct dominate "women's pages" in Islamic newspapers and magazines and women's TV-shows in the religious channels. Among Istanbul's Islamistic women this is expressed in their outdoor clothing. Most interestingly Metcalf points out that a more dispersed leadership seems to establish new possibilities for women to lead groups. In most cases the women who take the lead serve as icons of the many alternatives to live a religious life.

I have put rooms in the plural in the title, in an attempt to indicate variety and the opportunity of individual choices within the field of Muslim groups. In a more concrete meaning, the new condition prompts a struggle to find space for women's activities. In the contexts of my fieldwork, space is always gendered. It signifies meaning and signals distinct conditions of accessibility.

Generally, for Muslim men the public performance of religion is of utmost importance, i.e. going to a mosque or establishing another ritual space, *namazdergah*. Especially attending the Friday prayer is a public commitment, while women traditionally have carried out their religious duties at home. The mosque, the male public room par preference in the Muslim world, is challenged as women's groups are now asking officials for permission to use the mosques for meetings outside regular prayer hours (Lazreg 1994: 218 f). "Has practice also changed by the embrace of normative patterns — not only more practice but "correct" practice — at the cost of former local customary behavior?" Barbara Metcalf asks (1996: 9). In some Islamistic rhetoric the daily *namaz* is emphasized as the only correct form of prayer (i.e. with quranic authority) at the expense of *zikir* and other

additional forms of prayer. The latter is often reduced to "folk religion", *halk iman*, when not claimed to be superstitious, *batıl itikat*. Apparently the emic definitions of what a ritual is, or should be, are as complicated as the academic. There is an apparent conflict between institutional religious activism, blessed for ages by the secular state (Tapper & Tapper 1991), and the new hybrid forms of organisation, in many cases established by women. Due to the rapid development of local groups, it is not an easy task to discover the areas and arenas of women. Home is no longer the only proper place and the city is big. Many *vakflar* and other forms of organizations run by women have bought flats and other kinds of meeting places: *helâl* rooms emerge under the strict control of women. The distinct separation between female and male space and between women's and men's social activities becomes the base for Islamic women's supportive projects. A new debate is slowly approaching relating to questions like: to what extent does the separation between the sexes work emancipatory, when is the limit reached where separation is only petrifying hierarchies? Given the conditions of contemporary Istanbul, only a few intellectual Islamistic women approach this complex problem in more general terms and in public debate.

The emphasis on sufi rituals has been very important to the group I am studying. Old rituals have high status in their local community, and are surrounded by rich oral traditions, which give legitimacy to the women's activities. Even in a relatively small district, different groups offer a variety of rituals in their programmes. *Zikir* is not only a pious choice, but also undoubtedly part of what is conceived of as national cultural heritage. This link is important in the present political climate, with its strong alliances between religion and nationalism. Not only the Islamistic Refah Partisi mixes Islam and nationalism on their agenda. Several other rightist parties and organizations have taken up this winning concept. Mostly it is through short cut TV-news and pious pamphlets that information about the Muslim world reaches the *vakıf* of my study. Women's role in the Iranian parliamentary elections (May '97), charity work for Bosnia and the taliban of Afghanistan are present on the TV-screen and in sermon rhetoric in many cases serving as a correlate to the understanding of local traditions and circumstances.

The megacity and rapid urbanisation have given rise to new understandings of old rituals. In the contemporary complex society, more and more complicated social relations are established. The impact of globalisation on Islamic world culture is great. The knowledge of life in other Muslim countries is good and the traffic of influence works in both directions. The world of these women is certainly not simple.

The ritualisation of women's activities functions as a tool for empowerment, to gain legitimacy within the Muslim, male dominated community and its traditionalistic conventions, as well as it functions as resistance against mainstream secular society. In this respect, the women are forced into a two front battle. The Islamism that has been visible on the political arena in Turkey has hitherto not been of a radical kind, nevertheless the duties of women in the ideology of the Refah Partisi are not easily defined. No woman is seen in any leading position above local level. Turkish women in general have a very weak parliamentary position and, with few exceptions, Islamic women have fought their way outside the party system.

There are given normative rules in the holy scriptures for female behaviour, but these are not connected to urban life. Women must stretch the limits within the given set of rules, *hudut*. The conceptions behind the construction of *helâl* space and how public and domestic space is gendered are formed by the historical utopia, expressed in the Quran and the hadiths. The ambiguous urban situation has created the possibilities for religious women to build up organisations through which they could involve themselves in local society. The rituals at their place make it a proper place to visit.

Individual women themselves experience that they are the battleground of very different modes of how to communicate resistance to secular society. With Werner Schiffauer's terminology there is a certain "Islamization of the self" with a recognizable change from clear-cut collective activities to an apparent emphasis on more complicated personal choices. Most of the members of the small local groups in the major Turkish cities do not participate in public debate in TV or newspapers. Still they are active agents. The "new discursive tradition" is created on local level (Asad 1986) based on symbols, legends, norms and other points of reference that are shared by a larger group of women. In the turbulent urban setting of a mega-city such as Istanbul, women's social and religious practices are constantly redefined (Göle 1996a). A young generation of women who have had access to the perhaps most important of all kemalistic reforms, education, are now willing to take the lead for a Muslim interpretation of modernity, based in local traditions and women's experiences.

With their *vakf* the women of my study have acquired what Virginia Woolf claimed in her famous essay to be the necessities for female participation in public life: money and a room of their own.

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