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Paper for Easa conference 2016

Anthropological legacies and human futures

Panel: Gendering 'everyday Islam'

Title

Gendering Islam Through Migration Experience: Egyptian women's gatherings in a mosque in Turin (Italy).

Short Abstract

Describing the activities that Egyptian women organized in a mosque in the city of Turin (Italy), my paper brings insights on the debate about everyday Islam, about the multiple meanings of being a Muslim woman in a Western society and about how religious practices change through migration process.

Long Abstract

A big part of the Muslim population is now living in non-Muslim countries. Since studies in the countries of origin have underlined the differences in the religious life of men and women (Fernea *et al*. 1972; MacLeod 1991; Mahmood 2004), I argue that is also necessary to gendering the religious practices in the arrival countries. In order to do so, I describe the activities that two groups of Egyptian women organized in a mosque in the city of Turin (Italy) in the period in which I carried out my participant observation (2011-2013). The value of the gatherings in the mosques in migration context goes beyond the religious and spiritual aspect, and includes social and a cultural meanings. Women involved in the mosque were mostly organizing activities for them and for their children; describing those activities I want to show how their way to gathering in a local mosque brings insight to a wider debate about everyday Islam and about the multiple meaning of being Muslim in a western society. I consider their activities both as a way to accomplish Islamic duties and as a form of agency, that requires to be read beyond the dichotomy "modern vs. traditional". Differently from what is often done in the literature about everyday Islam, I do not read those practices in opposition with the textual norm, but rather in relation with the religious practices in the country of origin.

1. Egyptian women in Italy

The Egyptian community in Italy qualifies as a group that has concluded the migration cycle (Cingolani *et al*. 2014): from the start of the male migration chains in the mid-1970s and in the 1980s, a period of family reunification followed from the 1990s onward and, more recently, the Egyptian community has been characterized by stabilization of families and increased presence of the second generations.

Egyptians living in Turin come from different parts of the country, but the most important sending locations are rural areas situated in the governorates of Monufiyya and Qalyubiyya. Egypt's migratory history, from the early years of mass migration to the Gulf countries, has always been a male phenomenon. In Italy, in 2007 94% of visas issued to Egyptian women were for family reasons and their absence from the labor market has often been considered a confirmation of the fact that the life of these women is mainly conducted within the domestic realm (Coslovi *et al*. 2005; Gregorio 2010).

For their absence in the public scene, Egyptian women are almost absent in the literature on transnational migration. This is a trait shared by women from other backgrounds where the so-called "marriage migration" - migration that is within or resulting from a marriage - prevails. Women's marriage migration has been seen as a social institution determined merely by kinship and custom and, presuming the agency of individual women to be inconsequential, married women were excluded from consideration in migration studies (Palriwala *et al.* 2008, pp. 23-25).

The consequence is that the dichotomy of *public vs. private*, for decades criticized by feminist scholars engaged in the Middle East (Nelson 1974; Abu Lughod 1989), reappears in migration studies where the experiences of reunited women are stereotyped because their emigration rely on familiar reasons and their lives in the foreign country seems to play out in the private sphere. This view is supported by the system of thought with which the Egyptians interpret mobility, in which men only are described as "mobile" and may undertake a migration project.

The information contained in this paper are part of my doctoral research, conducted within a mosque in Turin. I will first of all describe the ethnographic context of the research and explore the value of the mosque as a public place. Second, I will illustrate the activities of two women's groups that have take place inside the prayer hall. The description of these activities will allow a discussion of religious activities as "social acts" as well as "gendering acts". I will then focus on the divergent dynamics that have arisen within the mosque itself since, far from being homogeneous groups, religious communities are divided along several fault lines (Warner *et al.* 1998), which are considered here as preferred perspectives to observe the relationship between genders, but also to illustrate different ways of experiencing Islam in the context of migration. Through analyses of this experience I will consider Islam, religious practices, and frequent attendance in places of worship as part of a process of integration and negotiation with the surrounding society, rather than a conservative element. In pursuing this goal I see my contribution in continuity with studies which for some years now have described and analyzed the religious experience of Muslim women in the context of migration (Freedman *et al.* 2000; Marranci 2007; Salih 2003; Tilikainen 2003;

McMicheal 2002) aiming to deconstruct the predominant negative image of religious Muslim women, still often represented as oppressed and alienated "others."

2. The second floor of the "Egyptian mosque"

The mosque where I conducted my research is in an area characterized by high presence of citizen of foreign origins. It occupies a space inside the courtyard of a building, which was once a large storage room. One door leads to the men's section and another to the females', two non-communicating spaces located, respectively, on the ground floor and second floor. The interior of the prayer hall is simple: the walls are painted in a light blue, the floors are covered with carpets and some shelves for religious books and a blackboard for teaching activities hang on the walls. On both floors, a *minbar* is placed, indicating the direction of Mecca. The lack of communication between the male and female space, due to the structure of the building itself, is compensated by a speaker system and internal TVs that spread the *adhan* [call to prayer] throughout the mosque and allow women to follow the *khutba* [Friday sermon].

It is important to note that the "first floor" of the mosque, the one dedicated to men, welcomes during times of prayer a group of people made up of men of different origins, while there is less national diversity in the female section. In some communities women are less present, and even when they are in Italy they don't go to the mosque since the prayer in the mosque is not considered mandatory for women. The times when the female section was most filled, in fact, were not during the five daily prayers and the Friday sermon, but on the weekend (when activities were organized for children) and during some weekday mornings (where there were scheduled activities for women). Given that these activities were organized by Egyptian women and directed mainly to women of the same origin, attending the female part of the mosque during these moments of meeting and over the weekend I had the clear perception of being in an "Egyptian mosque."

During the period in which family reunification began, the Muslim community had already embarked on a path of settlement in the territory. In the period in which women have begun to be reunited, some mosques already started their activities in the city, thus representing for women a place where they could pray and a safe space in which they could meet and share experiences

The construction of prayer halls, mosques and Islamic cultural centers in the diaspora meets not only spiritual needs, but also social and cultural ones (Dassetto *et al.* 1990) and my paper consider how religious spaces in migration are sites for cultural and identity preservation on the one hand and environments for transformation on the other, taking into account that mobility experiences are important elements for the construction and negotiation of various aspects of identity including religion (Aitchison *et al.* 2007, p. 13).

3. Between the public and the private spaces

From my point of view, there are several reasons for which first generation Muslim women have been scarcely addressed by the literature on transnational migration. A relevant reason is that the literature on migrant women continues to be too closely linked to their presence in the labour market (Anthias *et al.* 2000) with the result that nonworking women seem to be totally absent from

the public sphere. Another reason is that religious meeting places have long assumed a marginal position in the analysis of the public sphere (Gabaccia 1992, p. xxi).
Religious circles should instead be conceived of as one of the dimensions of the public sphere and should become a context in which to observe the agency of categories that seem to be lacking (George 2005). Reflecting on the characteristics and perceptions related to the mosque can lead to a breach in the rigid dichotomy between public and private spaces: although places of worship belong to the category of public spaces, the female part of the mosque has something that approaches a private space which is crucial to understanding the *familiarity* experienced by women in this context and the perception of *security* which explains why their husbands do not object to their attendance at the mosque, despite the rigidity expressed in the case of other public places.
The female-only presence differentiates the mosque from any other public space, the homogeneity of backgrounds qualifies it as a context in which to maintain links with the country of origin and finally its identification with Islam makes it *halal* [lawful]. The mosque takes on the appearance of a space that qualifies as protected, lawful and "Egyptian", so that the activities that take place in it are considered by women as well as their husbands to be "safe" (Ghannam 2002, p. 23). Nevertheless it is important to put the public dimension of the mosque at the core of the analysis for at least two main reasons: first, the mosque is a place that anyone can attend and second, is understood that religion in migration can take on dimensions that go beyond the private sphere (Ebaugh *et al.* 2000; Warner *et al.* 1998).

4. *Gatherings in the mosque*

The first activities in the "Egyptian mosque" of the city began in 2007 at the initiative of Ferial, a woman who had been in Turin for some years and is the wife of one of the board members. She firstly organized classes of Arabic for a small number of children. The number of participating children from three to ten years old grew steadily over the first three years, reaching a total of 90 students. The activities took place on the weekend and included Arabic lessons, various school subjects (e.g., mathematics carried out according to the Egyptian Ministry programs) and religious study. The size of the space allowed different activities to be held simultaneously: a room at the entrance was reserved for activities with younger children, while the great central hall and a smaller room were occupied by several groups of different levels, each with their teacher.
These moments both had a "formal" and an "informal" character: the first one is related to children's education and the second to the possibility for women to meet weekly. The children's mothers brought them to the mosque and often lingered there, finding a place to converse or spend some time together by sharing a meal or drinking a cup of tea. This experience was for some women an opportunity for remunerated work and provided others with a meeting space with other Egyptian women. Those informal meetings between women shed light on their social needs and pushed Ferial to organize activities also for them. She should be given credit for having been able to direct the activities of local associations into the mosque, offering interested women various kinds of social and cultural experiences.

A group of Italian women organized in the mosque Italian language lessons, and aerobic class. They also organized activities to bring women outside the mosque, as guided tours in the city and reading activities of classics of Arabic literature in the city's Museum of Eastern Art. The project was named "*Mabrouka*", an Arabic word which means "blessed", to indicate the value of carrying out a series of activities within an Islamically lawful context.

Starting in 2010, the existing activities were complemented by those promoted by Marwa, a woman from a rural area where many of the Egyptians residing in Turin come from. After spending nearly 15 years in Egypt without her husband, Marwa and her four children joined him in Turin. Marwa is part of the *da'wa* movement. In Egypt, Marwa had studied in *kulliat ad-da'wa*, the faculty where people interested in undertaking training activities in the mosques study, and later began to give lessons to a group of women. Upon arriving in Italy and discovering that there were no similar experiences in the mosque her husband used to attend, she sought to fill what she felt was a void in the religious practice of Muslim women in Turin.

The first activity proposed by Marwa was a religion class based on the study of sacred texts directed to women who accompany children to the mosque on Saturdays and Sundays. The project has then grown to include activities for children and youth. The difference with regard to Ferial's courses was that these lessons only dealt with religious education; the two programs in the mosque should therefore not have had any conflict, but many of the members of existing classes gradually moved to Marwa's activities, creating friction between members of the two groups. The success of Marwa's project is due to her religious and social role: a teacher of religion, with a background in the sector in Egypt as well, and promoter of religious education for women, Marwa has assumed the recognized role of spiritual leader. Initially her group was composed mainly of women from her own village, often bound together by ties of kinship or neighborhood, but she quickly also involved women of urban origin and non-Egyptian women, attracted by the desire for Islamic knowledge. Women emphasize the social aspect of these meetings, but above all affirm the importance of the opportunity to increase their knowledge of Islam, a need that for many of them increased only after their arrival in Italy (Salih 2003, p. 105) .

The weekly meetings lasted about three hours and provided for different activities: the first part of the lesson was dedicated to review of a section of the Quran they had read and commented on in previous lessons. The women had to re-read and study the part under discussion in order to be able to repeat it by heart the following week. The second part of the lesson was devoted to the continuation of reading and explanation of the Quran. Marwa read and had the women listen to the correct intonation of the reading according to the *tajwid* (the science of the correct pitch of Quran reading) and following her reading with the *tafsir* (explanation of the sacred text. The last part of the lesson was devoted to the deepening of other parts of the Sunna, like the study of the *hadit* or topics of interest for proper Islamic behavior in everyday life (e.g.: conditions to be met before prayer, how to behave when guests visits, the difference between obligations and the duties of a good Muslim, etc.).

The practice of a study group dedicated to women which emerged in the Egyptian capital is described by Mahmood as a way of increasing religious knowledge, which risks being marginalized

by secularization and Westernization (2004, p. 2). In the migration context, warnings about the risk of losing touch with one's religion are even more urgent and thus this activity takes on new meanings and this is precisely why in their encounter with Italian society many women have realized the importance of an Islamic lifestyle (Salih 2003, p. 105).

5. Beyond the individual duty

Both women's activities in the mosque have pursued objectives which fall into two spheres of significance: social and individual.

With regard to the individual sphere, the activities organized by Ferial mainly responded to the needs of women to learn the Italian language and to participate in stimulating activities that gave them the opportunity to spend time outside the home, breaking the daily routine. For those who worked as teachers with children, the activities also resulted in personal satisfaction because of their commitment to the community. With regard to the religious study proposed by Marwa, the motivations that influenced women to participate in the activities were mostly of a spiritual nature and related to a desire to deepen their knowledge of Islamic teachings. Several women, telling me about their choice to participate in Marwa's lessons, stressed the importance of living outside of a country with a Muslim majority as a factor encouraging them to gain a greater knowledge of religion.

As for the social context, both kinds of meetings provided an opportunity for knowledge and cultural growth, also featuring an intense relational moment for connecting with their communities (Andezian 1983, p. 61). It is also important to note that both groups have been promoting activities for women as well as for children. Female attendance at the mosque is virtually inseparable from the educational role they play that inevitably acquired new features upon migrating. Muslim parents often express concerns about the excessive freedom of dress and the reduced respect for authority attributed to young Italians, or of other origins, placing such evidence in contrast to the morality and respect for adult generations present in their home society. Added to this is the fact that in Turin the task of raising children is "nuclearized", giving women a great responsibility. In Egypt they lived with the extended family of the husband, so parents are supported by uncles and grandparents with whom they share responsibility for future generations. Despite the presence in the same city of people from the same villages and even from the same families, migration loosens the family network ties, with the consequence that extended family loses some of the roles it plays in Egypt. In Italy, women feel more responsible for the behavior of children and family social and religious identity (Salih 2003, p. 71).

Because of the importance the role of mother has for Egyptian women it is relevant to note that women's attendance at the mosque is not linked solely to the performance of an individual duty, like prayer, but also to their and their children's participation in collective activities. Using their children's needs as a point of departure, women took part in activities that have had an effect on their social life as well as on their position within the family. The mosque become a place where they can discuss their problems and reinforcing knowledge of religious matters makes them more sure of their role. research on Islamic study groups in the European context have confirmed that

women look for answers to practical questions about everyday conduct in a non-Muslim context. Reflection on daily life leads to a desire to acquire not abstract but applicable and useful religious knowledge, that Jouili called "applicable knowledge" (2015, p. 51).
Through these activities, women respond to a need for sociability, to an educational need for the younger generation (for whom they feel a special responsibility) and for their own their spiritual renewal.

6. Gendering Islam in Migration

Although both groups of women who organize activities within the mosque refer to a common "Islamic" identity, the processes they have shaped reflect two different ways of understanding the relationship between the activities undertaken and religion and - ultimately - two different ways to "be Muslim" in migration.
The relationship between space and gender is dialogical and moves in several directions: on the one hand gender is a factor used to give or deny access to certain areas and certain activities, on the other hand the spaces where people spend their time and the activities they undertake can contribute to the formation of gender and to the creation of new gender roles. This relationship allows us to analyze the "female space" (Lachenmann *et al.* 2008, p. 32) of the mosque according to two categories: first the possibility of gaining access to the sacred place and second how attending the mosque contributes to the creation of forms of femininity.
The opposition between the "first floor" and "second floor" of the mosque should be understood in light of the link between gender and public spaces and the changes it may undergo in the context of migration. Marwa, like most of the women who attended her lessons, comes from a rural area where it is unusual for women to go to the mosque (MacLeod 1991, p. 79). While there is widespread consensus that the Prophet allowed and strongly supported the participation of both men and women in places of worship, for women this practice is not widespread in most Islamic communities (Haddad *et al.* 2006, p. 62). In Egypt the mosque is perceived as a male space and female religious practices are mostly relegated to the domestic sphere. The pietist movement which has spread throughout Cairo contributed to altering this view, which nevertheless survives in rural contexts. The lessons Marwa imparted in her village, in fact, took place in her home, in keeping with the social hierarchy of the villages. The fact that migration allows women to bring their practices from the private to the public space is very important because the women's study groups alter the predominantly male character of the mosque, triggering a process that Mahmood called "democratization of the religious sphere" (Mahmood 2004, p. 2). Women do not view the religious experience as an element that connects them with the country of origin, since having access to this learning experience is inevitably connected with the fact of being abroad.
Women's approach into religious spaces does not give rise to a unique dynamic, rather to plural expressions. Analyzing how these women understand gender and religiosity in migration we can observe forms of conflict within "the second floor of the mosque." Many women - feeling responsible for the education of the children - fear a sense of loss (Jouili 2015, p. 49). The Arabic language and the Muslim religion are what most families want to hand down to their children. This

is why the religion courses managed by Marwa have attracted some of the members who first attended Ferial's "school." Instead of working on a partnership, the two groups arrived at an implicit opposition based not only on management of the activities and the control of the dynamics of the mosque, but also and above all on the opposition between models of femininity and religiosity. The differences are due to the distinction that Salih made among "women [who] identify with a Global Muslim community, the umma, and refuse contact with non-practicing Muslims, [and] other women [who] redefine locally or challenge religious meanings and combine different cultural and religious repertoires" (2003, p. 333).

This leads to different ways of defining religion in the Italian context: for Marwa Islam becomes a strong symbol of identity, the essence of a culture maintained in opposition to Western society; for Ferial, however, the demands of life in a non-Muslim country require to be open to the context, conducting an active life in the country of destination seeking an Islamically correct way to do it. From her point of view both religious activities and reciprocal knowledge with the surrounding context represent duties: know and be known becomes an imperative of the relationship with the surrounding world.

7. Conclusions

What makes the study of women's participation in the mosque particularly significant is that it is at the core of several issues. First, the presence of women studying the sacred texts refers back to the "democratization of the religious sphere" (Mahmood 2004, p. 2) and the increasing relevance that it assumes both in Muslim-majority countries and in the arrival contexts of migration is giving rise to feminine thoughts on religion and a gender interpretation of sacred texts.

Another noteworthy aspect is that of the role of advocacy and social obligation which this type of theology promotes in various settings (Guardi *et al.* 2009, p. 49; Hafez 2011) that is confirmed by the coexistence even in Turin of study activities that women do for themselves and activities for children and young people which they organize in the mosque.

Women's participation in the religious sphere also takes value away from two dichotomies that often cause stereotypical views of communities and Muslim practices. The first is the contraposition between tradition and modernity, the second is the already-mentioned contrast between public and private spaces. Describing attendance at the mosque as a traditional practice and as maintaining habits related to the country of origin obscures the novelty value that this instead has for many women who did not attend the mosque in Egypt. On the contrary, for some of them it is in migration that prayer passes from the private to the public sector and Islam becomes the reference within which to find answers to questions arising from contact with the host society.

In the case of Egyptian women - whom we saw were scarcely present in other public spheres of Italian society - analysis of the religious space may restore the opportunity to observe action outside the domestic context. The educational activity that some women carry out in the mosque is consistent with the role of mother and educator that is attributed mainly to women, but it is also the arena in which women can develop a new awareness of the roles that they fulfill.

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