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Memory, Women and Community: Western Europe

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This entry deals with women's role in the construction of memory and collective identity in Western Europe. It focuses on migrant Muslim women and the way religious practices are remembered and reconstituted.

Memory, gender, and migration

Studies on memory and remembering are rapidly expanding within the disciplines of the social, historical, and political sciences (Boyarin 1992, Wertsch 2002, Olick and Robbins 1998, Misztal 2003). The same holds true for the notion of identity. This is no coincidence because the two notions are intimately connected. The core meaning of individual or group identity is sustained by remembering and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity (Gillis 1994, 3).

Memory is influenced by the particular social, cultural, and historical condition in which individuals find themselves. Gender is accordingly an important – but not exclusive – factor in the differentiation of people's memory. Extensive literature points to the importance of women as storekeepers of memory or as custodians of tradition. Boundaries of belonging and constructions of national and collective identities are symbolized by women and the female body (Neubauer and Geyer-Ryan 2000, Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989, Yuval-Davis 1997, Anthias and Lazaridis 2000).

Connerton (1992) has advanced insights into the importance of ritual celebrations and commemorations for the ways societies remember. He argues that communal memory is shaped by the ritual re-enacting of past events. Recollected knowledge of the past is conveyed and sustained by ritual performances. Recollections are at work in two distinct areas of social activity, in commemorative ceremonies and in bodily practices. His major contribution to the study of communal memory consists of connecting commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices. Connerton particularly stresses the incorporated character and habitual practice of memory. In habitual memory the past is sedimented in the body.

Migration entails a radical break with the past. Commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices have to be reproduced in a new context. An important consequence of migration is that “territory is decentred and exploded into multiple settings” (Fortier 2000, 157). That is, in the context of migration, it is no longer the nation that forms the site and frame of memory. A well-documented process for migrants from Muslim backgrounds is the strengthened consciousness of religious identity. This reorientation can take many forms and is the result of internal as well as external factors; in the end, however, most Muslims are forced to deal with religion (Roy 2000, Vertovec and Rogers 1998). Religion thus becomes a central frame of memory and identity formation.

In the new locality, the family also acquires a particularly important role in conveying and sustaining communal memories from one generation to the next. The family displaces the nation as the site of memory (Fortier 2000). This development strengthens women's role in “memory work” within migrant communities (Gillis 1994).

Reproduction of Islamic rituals in Western Europe

It is thus in the religious commemorative rituals within the family and the “mnemonic migrant community” at large that communal memory is reshaped in the context of diaspora. Whereas early in the migration process these commemorations were performed inside private homes or sometimes forgotten, they are increasingly organized by communal associations and mosques and even performed in the streets (Werbner 2002). In the Netherlands, community centers sometimes function as the locus of collective memory for minor celebrations such as Sha‘bān, ‘Ashūra, and ‘Īd al-Mawlid for Moroccan migrant women. Recipes for traditional dishes and religious songs are reproduced, meals are shared, and tapes played. Cooking special dishes for commemorative rituals is a central but neglected part of memory work performed by women (Kersher 2002). Spellman (2001) notes a tremendous increase in Iranian social and cultural organizations in London and the reconstitution of religious gatherings (*sufra s*) by women. Iranian women use *sufra* gatherings as identity building vehicles, during which cultural constructions of gender are negotiated, contested, and reinforced. The task of sustaining memories and rebuilding communal identities is imbued with current concerns and negotiations.

The Islamic calendar is rich in commemorative rituals such as special days during Ramadan and the concluding feast ‘Īd al-Fiṭr, the Feast of Sacrifice (‘Īd al-Aḏḥā), Islamic New Year, ‘Ashūra, and the Birthday of the Prophet (‘Īd al-Mawlid). Moroccan migrant women used to prepare in the home country for the month of fasting either through fasting or feasting during the month of Sha‘bān. Women came together and shared a meal of couscous. In the Netherlands, however, many women mention that they tend to “forget” this celebration. Ramadan is important for communal and religious identities and is often referred to as the month of “sharing.” This relates to “sharing food,” “sharing time,” and “sharing with the poor.” Fasting is understood as sharing the experience of poverty, and toward the end of the month money is distributed to the poor, practices that are sustained in Europe. The most important difference between Ramadan in Europe and in Muslim countries is the absence of “Ramadan Time” (Armbrust 2000). In many Muslim countries, day and night are turned upside down. Office hours and school schedules are adjusted to Ramadan, television programming is suitable for Ramadan, and the time of breaking the fast is broadcast. In Europe, daily life goes on as usual.

The lack of family and the lack of synchrony of sacred and secular time change the character of most commemorative celebrations in Europe and strongly influence the celebrations for ‘Īd al-Fiṭr and ‘Īd al-Aḏḥā. Schiffauer (1991) observes the experience of emptiness and meaninglessness during religious commemorations among Turkish migrants in Germany. The changing content and meaning is noted particularly with regard to ‘Īd al-Aḏḥā. In the Netherlands, important transformations are occurring in the place and the time of slaughtering. This is also indicated by research in France and Belgium (Brisebarre 1993, 1998, 1999, Dasseto 1998). In Morocco, slaughtering is mostly done inside the home or in the street in front of the house. Selecting and buying the sheep, as well as the sacrifice itself, is a household affair. Because of the transfer to the slaughterhouse in Europe, women are no longer part of the selecting and slaughtering ritual. Many migrants also perceive the temporal reordering of the ritual as a problem. They have to wait at the slaughterhouse and are not able to perform the ritual at the time prescribed by the Mālikī school of law. Moreover, the meat of the sheep should be shared in a ratio of one third for the family, one third for relatives, neighbors, and friends, and one third for the poor. In Morocco meat can easily be distributed to the poor. Most migrants in the Netherlands, however, say that they do not know poor people and eat the entire sheep with relatives and friends. According to them the sacrifice has almost turned into an ordinary meal. Werbner (1990) mentions the changed meaning of the *khatam Qur’ān*, the sealing of the Qur’ān for British Pakistanis. After reading the Qur’ān, an offering of food is made to the guests and a share is put aside for the poor as charity. As “there are no poor people in Manchester,” the central meaning of charity is lost and changed into hospitality .

On the 10th of the month of Muḥarram, the first month of the Islamic New Year, ‘Ashūra is celebrated. This celebration tends to be forgotten by Moroccan migrant women in the Netherlands because they do not always know when these occasions are celebrated. Not all of them are acquainted with the Arabic calendar and they do not see the tangible signs that would remind them of the approaching commemorations in the country of origin. That is, the sensory aspects of time and habitual aspects of celebrations are absent. During ‘Īd al-Mawlid, some people in Morocco visit a *mawsim*, an annual festival at a saint's shrine, organized by a *zāwiya*, religious brotherhood. The *mawsim* continues for seven days during which people perform *dhikr s*, litanies, and *hadras*, trance dances. Whereas some migrant women bemoan the disappearance of ‘Īd al-Mawlid, others perceive the way it is sometimes celebrated in Morocco as *bid’a* (innovation). They regard religious lessons and religious songs as the proper form of commemoration.

Memory work and changing identities

In the process of building new communal identities there are thus diverse and contradictory tendencies. First, new commemorative elements are created, for example in the form of religious classes and lectures on commemorations. Second, migration leads to a process of reconstruction of rituals. Third, it can also lead to a loss of recollected knowledge and erosion of ritual practices.

Celebrations are partly reconstructed in a hybrid and pluralistic fashion that reflects the ongoing process of negotiating identities. There is, for instance, a tendency to organize multicultural ifṭār meetings during Ramadan. Especially ʿĪd al-Fiṭr and ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā are occasions for organizing special events with music, singing, and dancing by the younger generation. Other tendencies in addition to secularization and hybridization can also be observed. In the Netherlands, most older women still remember ʿAshūra, if not for the feasting at least for the fasting. The generally observed separation of “culture” or “tradition” from “religion” can be analyzed for religious celebrations as well (Vertovec and Rogers 1998, Roy 2000). Religious aspects tend to become dominant whereas the mixing with cultural traditions is frowned upon.

Minor celebrations tend to be forgotten. Due to migration, bodily and sensory clues for remembering are dislocated and the transmission of societies' memories is no longer performed in habitual spaces. As Dakhliā (2001) claims, however, forgetting is part of the process of remembering since memory erodes at the margins of groups. Forgetting can be conceptualized as a process of reconstruction in which elements that are less relevant for the present context are latent. Explicit reflection is required on the commemorative performances in the new context, which also allows for contest and reconstruction of the way communities remember. Memory is continuously reshaped and the memory work is constantly adapted to new circumstances. As Salih (2000, 2001) observes in her study of Moroccans in Italy, migrants are neither champions of hybridity nor simply reproducing traditional cultures. There are multiple paths through which Muslim migrants in Western Europe renegotiate individual and collective identities within their “mnemonic communities.”

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