

Post-Doctoral Project

KARIN VAN NIEUWKERK

**In the Western nation-state, the government, the media and the dominant culture determine who is regarded as a minority and what constitutes difference, whether ethnic, religious or otherwise. The attributes of groups used as markers of difference can change over time, but increasingly religion is used as an immutable marker.**

What is at stake in discourses about religious difference is an underlying concept of a reified and essentialized culture. According to Bauman (1999), there are two theories of culture: the essentialist and the processual theory of culture. That is, culture is comprehended as something one has, or as a process one shapes.

The interesting point Bauman makes is that the social scientist should not make a simple choice between the 'wrong' essentialist and 'right' processual notion of culture, but should study the reasons and processes by which people change from an essentialist discourse into the processual discourse and vice versa. People are endowed with a 'dual discursive competence'. They know when to reify their own religious identity and when to query their own reification.

## Migrating Islam Changes in Religious Discourse

The study on 'Migrating Islam: Changes in Religious Discourse among Moroccan Migrant Women in the Netherlands' focuses on the 'discursive competence' of the study group. The religious perceptions, practices and identifications of female believers are relatively neglected in current research. Women often symbolize and demarcate boundaries between social, religious and ethnic groups. In many studies, women are therefore particularly analysed as symbols. 'Women as religious actors' is a less well-documented phenomenon. This study perceives women as agents who actively shape religious practices.

'Migrating Islam' will be investigated at two intertwined levels: that of speaking about Islam and its central tenets and that of religious practice. Upon migration, Islam undergoes a dual process of universalization and localization. Among young generations, there is a tendency to reject the parents' conformity to pre-migration cultural tradi-

tions. They strive for an authentic universal Islam. Thus, the change in religious discourse among the generations should be systematically compared.

This research consists of two parts. The more general part will analyse the main changes in religious experience and practice as a result of migration to the Netherlands. It focuses on the way women speak about Islam, its perceived adaptability to new circumstances, its changing meaning in daily life. It will particularly focus on such central conceptions as *halal* and *haram* and document changes among the generations.

The second part provides an in-depth study of the religious concept of *ajr* (religious merit). *Ajr* points to the spiritual compensation one obtains for meritorious deeds. Collecting *ajr* is particularly important in the religious experience and practice of women. There are indications that this central concern of spiritual life in Morocco changes upon migration to the Netherlands.

In general, it appears to be more difficult to collect *ajr* in the Dutch context. Several means of gaining merit, such as by visiting graves, is almost absent in the new context. New forms of meritorious deeds, mostly related to dress code, appear to gain prominence in the new secular circumstances. Distinctions between the universal and essential versus the cultural and non-essential in religious doctrines appear to be sorted out. Changing practices of collecting merit thus provide insight into processes of localization and universalization of Islamic discourse. New local productions of Islamic discourse appear to take on a universal form. ◆

*Karin van Nieuwkerk is a lecturer in social anthropology, Middle East Studies and Mediterranean Studies at Nijmegen University, the Netherlands, and is a fellow at the ISIM. She is author of A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt, Texas University Press (1995).*

*E-mail: K.v.Nieuwkerk@let.kun.nl*