

# ESF Scientific Report



ESF Exploratory Workshop on

## **Islamization of the cultural sphere?**

### **Critical perspectives on Islam and performing arts in Western Europe and the Middle East**

Amsterdam, 22-25 October 2008  
Convened by:

**Karin van Nieuwkerk**  
Radboud University Nijmegen

### **1. Executive Summary**

The ESF workshop “Islamization of the cultural sphere? Critical perspectives on Islam and performing arts in Western Europe and the Middle East” was held in Amsterdam 22-25 October 2008. Scholars from different disciplines were invited: Islamic Studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and political sciences.

#### *The aims of the workshop*

The aim of the workshop was to bring together scholarship on discourses, practices and contestations with regard to new creative productions in which Islam and performing arts are merged. First, it was intended to highlight different discourses on Islam and the performing arts, including moderates, liberals, and hardliners as well as new discourses on ‘art with a mission’. Second, it was aimed to bring together scholars working on the perspectives of artists, their artistic productions and contestations regarding these productions – including Islamic nasheed songs, Islamic pop, hip-hop, and rap, as well as Islamic soaps. Third, non-religious artistic productions that are objects of attacks by Islamists and performing artists such as heavy metal musicians who protest against an increasing Islamization of the public sphere were included in the workshop’s scope. Lastly, the workshop intended to highlight the gendered nature of the discourses on art and religion and of the sensitivity around pious art. The workshop thus aimed to show the multiplicity of voices, discourses and practices in Muslim communities in Western Europe as well as the Middle East with regard to Islam and performing arts.

#### *Relevance of the topic*

The workshop explored new developments of substantial scientific and social relevance. First, it dealt with the role of religion in the public sphere. Instances of and reactions towards an increased presence of Islam in the public sphere in Western Europe and the Middle East were

compared. The workshop particularly focused on the presence of religion in the cultural sphere, both at the level of discourse and of creative practices. Second, the workshop dealt with alternative forms of globalization that flows from 'East to West'. Globalization and the new technologies of internet, digital TV, and satellite ensure global flows of artistic expression and influence. Important artistic productions are being invented, elaborated, made and remade in multiple contexts. Present developments with regard to the Islamization of art and entertainment in the Middle East have important influences on the West-European scene as well. Third, the workshop focused on representations of Islam in the West. In Muslim minority contexts, Islam is generally confronted with negative images. Especially after the Danish cartoon affair, representations of Islam in the media concentrate on the assumed incompatibility of Islam and Western values as well as between Islam and art. The pious productions are also under attack in Muslim majority contexts by both secularists and Islamists. The workshop highlighted the contestations in Western and more generally secular discourses, as well as in Islamist discourses. It particularly aimed to move beyond these discourses and consider new debates and creative practices in which religion and performing arts are combined, a topic that has not yet been studied thoroughly in the Muslim context.

### *Scientific Impact*

Merging piety and performing arts is a complex and contested issue in both Muslim minority and Muslim majority contexts. Particularly the strong emotive and sensory power of performing arts makes it such a sensitive matter in the eyes of religious authorities. Creative expressions are a medium for articulating different identities and subject positions. The question whether the workshop's topic 'Islam and the performing arts' deals with performers producing religious art or religious performers making art, can be bridged by focussing on pious subjectivities. Religious subjectivities are focal in religious discourse, in artistic practice that are inspired by religious sensibilities, as well as in the performers' own striving for piety. Pious arts are a particularly rich topic to investigate several issues that are not yet thoroughly dealt with. First, pious performing arts open up the study of the sensitive relationship between gender, religion and the body. Second, the visual and aural character of performing arts calls for a close look at the relationship between art, the senses and religion. Third, the study of pious performing arts also adds to our understanding of the character and scope of the Islamist counterpublic. Finally, the emergence of pious performing arts calls for a careful contextualizing and historicizing of this socio-religious project. Due attention must be given to the emergent post-Islamist, liberal public sphere and (religious) market, globalisation, and the development of new media.

### *Outcomes*

It is considered to organise a follow up workshop. It is the intention to publish the contributions. The insights and new themes that were discussed on the workshop will guide the publication: focus on pious subjectivities; counterpublic location in senses, emotions and affects; attention to gender and bodily dimensions of performing arts; due attention to historicizing the development towards pious art; contextualising pious performing arts and its reception with respect to globalization and the market.

## 2. Scientific Content

Because some people were absent due to personal or professional reasons the programme has been adjusted. The final programme consisted of four sessions: Europe and the diaspora; discourses on music, art, and boredom; musical cultures; and finally modesty and the market. Many papers were closely related to each other and a different order of the papers would have been possible as well. In the following section, the points of comparison will be described that were elaborated in the general discussions.

### **Europe and the diaspora: Cultural racism and cultural nationalism**

In the session on Europe and the diaspora, Peter Hervik discussed the present discourse on Islam and Islamism in the public sphere in Europe. He took the Danish cartoon affair as his starting point to illustrate the current discourse on the assumed irreconcilability of Islam and Western values. This discourse which he calls ‘exercising incompatibility’ actually predated the cartoon issue. It makes all Muslims into ‘Islamists’ and for that reason Hervik warns against using terms as ‘Islamist’ and ‘Islamization’. The same mechanism of exercising incompatibility might inform these terms when used by scholars. We need to study the creation of ‘enemy images’ and particularly look at the producers and not the objects. The production of enemy images involves cultural racism and essentialisms as well as pragmatic politics. In the discussion, the underlying gender logics of both pragmatic politics as well as the trope of the enemy were highlighted. Negotiation and dialogue are presented as female signs of weakness and not real politics. The public sphere is apparently the realm for battling and provocation not for dialogue.

Musical reactions towards discrimination and cultural racism were one of the major themes of Thomas Solomon’s contribution on ‘Turkish Rap between Homeland and Diaspora’. Rapping is a protest genre and is used against racism. Islam is one of the themes coming up in rap and is imagined in rather different ways. Solomon particularly drew attention to the different ways Islam is evoked in the diasporic as opposed to the homeland context. In the diaspora, Islam is not a doctrinal religious body of knowledge and practices but an identity. It is “Muslimness” rather than Islam. The rappers construct an affectional or emotional way of bonding with religion. In the diaspora, they are confronted with negative stereotypes and can revalorize the symbol of Islam. They turn it in a sign of pride and call for a shared cultural or ethnic identity. It evokes a kind of cultural nationalism. In Turkey, rappers can use religious discourse as political oratory to challenge the secular state. Rappers in both contexts express oppositional identities in which Islam is a basket that can be employed in various ways to create Muslim subjectivities.

### **Discourses on music, art, and boredom: the body and the self**

In the second session, different discourses were elaborated. Karin van Nieuwkerk detailed the discussions in Egypt among Islamists about ‘art with a mission’. Instead of condemning art, moderate Islamists belonging to the *wasatiyya* movement as well as several new lay preachers address the needs of the pious upper class for pious recreation. ‘Art with a mission’ is a pedagogical project aimed at bringing piety and fun together. Two examples of pious art productions were compared. Halaal songs have been very successful whereas Islamic soaps were criticized for their preachy content. This difference was linked to the counterpublic character of the media involved, that is the visual versus the aural media, as well as to the gendered way the body is staged in soaps. Pleasurable bodily pious performances by women are a particularly sensitive issue.

Samuli Schielke turned attention to the existential daily problem of rural youth, which is connected to boredom and lack of recreational activity. Their intricate discourse on being

bored and the different ways of killing times were discussed. Schielke drew out the ambivalent attitudes of youth towards the 'art with a mission' project of Islamists. They do not live by the logic of purpose, generally being surrounded by a perceived lack of purposefulness. They combine piety and contradict religious regulations without necessarily seeing it as contradictory or feeling the need to try to solve contradictions. They do engage in acts of self-realization and construct subjectivities which ambiguously combine religious and non-religious sensibilities. Schielke's contribution thus called attention to the tendency by several scholars to overemphasize the religious character of self realization and sensibilities.

Jonas Otterbeck analyzed different discourses on music among religious scholars. He distinguished the different position on music of 'hardliners', 'moderates' and 'liberals', and discussed the works of scholars belonging to the three discourses. Otterbeck carved out the different understandings of the individual within the different discourses. Whereas the moderates try to educate the individuals, the liberals stress personal control and intention while the hardliners promote disciplining the individual by *hisba*, that is commanding of good and warding evil by the hand, tongue or heart. He also connected the actual practices and attacks on musicians to the strength of the state. Particularly in the case of a breakdown of the state, the principle of *hisba* by the hands tends to be strengthened.

### **Musical Cultures: emotionality and subversiveness**

Martin Stokes elaborated the development of the parallel Islamist public sphere in Turkey which is cosmopolitan and challenging the secular regime. Islamist musical pop culture had to start from scratch. It was developed within student dorms into a successful genre particularly by Mehmet Emin Ay. Besides the newness of the genre, the use of the popular arabesque sounds, and the cosmopolitan passion for Arabic music generally, it is particularly the tearful emotionality that accounts for its success. The sentimental music is also meant as an outreach to bring diasporic youth back into the fold. It is this successful bonding through shared emotion and sensitivity that fashions the counterpublic mode. Rather than the Habermasian notion of reasoning and quest for secular modernity, the affects and sensorium are crucial in the Islamic parallel public sphere.

Pierre Hecker discussed the way Heavy Metal musicians contested the Islamization of the public sphere in Turkey. They are accused of moral and religious subversiveness and are called Satanists. They distance themselves from religious practice and transgress verbal, gender, and physical boundaries by blasphemy and, for instance, by wearing long hair. Interestingly metalheads use anti-Christian symbols to rebel, like the inverted cross, instead of anti-Islamic symbols. This is not only due to fear for repercussions, or a possible lack of anti-Islamic symbols but also relates to the global flow of symbols belonging to metalhead culture and lifestyle.

### **Modesty and the market**

Bart Barendregt discussed the emergence of nasyid Boy Bands in Asia, particularly Malaysia. Religion sells: Not only the nasyid pop music, which - like in Egypt and Turkey - developed in universities, but also the ringtones are commercially successful. The nasyid music is funky but still within the bounds of Shariah. The Middle East is not the only role model of nasyid music. It strikes a balance between East and West that leads to debates about authenticity. The boy bands have a particularly large following among young women. For the performers involved, there is however a delicate balance between pop and religion. Too much pop leads to discussions about its lawfulness. Also the way the body is staged in performing is a delicate matter in striking the balance between pop and religion. The movements of the body should be restrained and the female voice is under debate. The balance between piety and pop, East and West, to be a Muslim and modern is continuously debated and renegotiated.

Jeanette Jouili also discussed the tensions between modesty, success and staging the body for Muslim performers in Europe. She highlighted the ethical quest and practice of the performers. Not only the messages they convey, in which da`wah (calling to the faith), dealing with Islamophobia and correcting negative images of Islam is central, also the conduct and inner attitudes should reflect Islamic virtues. They show humility and avoid self aggrandisement by way of success. They prefer praising God instead of applause. The female performers are extra vigilant in the way they perform, and they restrain from moving while performing. With the right intention, a good message and moral conduct, performing can be legitimate, fun and empowering. Yet it is in constant need of self discipline and techniques of the self.

Karim Tartoussieh directed attention to the market, the media and citizenship in Egypt. The relative success of the 'clean cinema' is not only a matter of morals but also of market forces. It is connected to the emergence of satellite TV and the proliferation of distribution conglomerates. The involvement of Saudi capital is not responsible for the morally conservative tone since Saudi capital is liberal due to the development of neo-liberal Islamism. Both Islamists and secularists contest the legitimacy of the Egyptian state and look for different forms of citizenship. Popular culture is a powerful tool for promoting forms of civil society and citizenship. Besides the morally conservative 'clean cinema', other non-religious strands as well as independent films are being created as a counterculture or as a counterpublic sphere.

### **3. Assessment of contribution to the field**

During the general discussions the many points of convergence were assessed as well as the points that should be developed further.

#### *Concepts*

There were several concepts involved that should be elaborated upon. First, the concepts of 'Islamists' and 'Islamization' needs critical scrutiny. In the Danish context and probably more general in Western Europe, Islam, Muslims and Islamists are increasingly becoming equivalents in public discourses. Scholarly use of the term stemming from the Middle East - in which Islamism stand for the political project - can be misunderstood. It thus needs careful delineation. The same holds true for the concept of Islamization which sounds threatening in the West Europe context and is thus difficult to use as a neutral descriptive term. Islamization should be perceived as a social project with different outcomes in different historical and local contexts. For individual believers Islam it is one of many possible embodied identities which should not beforehand be overstated.

Secondly, the concept of public sphere, cultural sphere and particularly counter public (sphere) should be clarified. Many studies have been conducted on Habermas' notions of public sphere, also in the context of the Middle East, mainly connected to the new media. In particular the liberal assumptions of the notion, the assumed rational ways of reasoning, and kinds of public participating in the public sphere are debated. The notion of counterpublic is discussed in a similar fashion. The workshop contributions point at an alternative conceptualisation of publics and counterpublics through focussing on the cultural sphere: The emotive power of music and the sensory aspects of performing arts more generally create spaces for locating the public and counterpublic not that much in people/publics but in different regimes of bonding, affecting and moving peoples' senses.

### *New themes and insights*

In the discussions new themes and insights were emphasized that many papers (implicitly) addressed: pious subjectivities of performers and fans; staging gender and the body, performing arts' power to move emotions, affects, sentiments and the senses; historicizing pious art and contextualizing it in terms of media, globalisation and the (religious) market.

Creative expressions are a medium for articulating different identities and subject positions. The question whether the workshop's topic 'Islam and the performing arts' deals with performers producing religious art or religious performers making art, can be bridged by focussing on pious subjectivities. Religious subjectivities are focal in religious discourse, in artistic practice that are inspired by religious sensibilities, as well as in the performers' own striving for piety. Pious arts are a particularly rich topic to investigate the bodily and gendered dimension of performing arts. Also the relationship between art, the senses and religion is a topic that is not yet studied well and came out clearly in the contributions. Particularly the strong emotive and sensory power of performing arts makes it such a sensitive matter in the eyes of religious authorities. Also the location of the Islamist counterpublic in its sensory character or soundscape as well as its power of sentimental bonding came out and deserves more elaboration. It was stressed that pious performing arts is a socio-religious and political project that needs more historicizing. It should also be studied in the context of globalisation, emergence of new media and the developing (religious) market. Finally it was concluded that the scope of the case studies on pious art should be broadened and include the Muslim world at large instead of limiting it to Europe and the Middle East.

### *Outcomes*

We consider organising another conference and will meet at panels at general conferences like MESA, AAA and EASA. More specifically we discussed the possibility and future directions of publishing the contributions. The above-mentioned insights and new themes will guide the publication: Focus on pious subjectivities; counterpublic location in senses, emotions and affects; attention to gender and bodily dimensions of performing arts; due attention to historicizing the development towards pious art; contextualising pious performing arts and its reception with respect to globalization and the market. Other contributors (working for instance on Islam and the performing arts in Asia and the USA) will be invited to join the publication in order to expand the scope from the Middle East towards the Muslim world at large.

#### 4. Final programme

##### PROGRAMME Thursday 23 October 2008

09.45 -10.00 Welcome coffee

10.00 -10.15 *Opening and introduction*

**Karin van Nieuwkerk** (Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands)  
*Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF)*

SESSION ONE: Europe and the diapora

10.15-11.00 Paper 1: *Exercising incompatibility in the Danish cartoon affair*  
**Peter Hervik** (Malmö University, Sweden)

11.00-11.45 Paper 2: *Hardcore Muslims: Islamic Themes in Turkish Rap between Diaspora and Homeland*  
**Thomas Solomon** (University of Bergen, Norway)

11.45-12.00 Coffee/tea break

SESSION TWO: Discourses on music, entertainment and boredom

12.00-12.45 Paper 3: *New Religiosity and 'Fann al-Hadif': Discussions on 'Art with a Mission' in Egypt*  
**Karin van Nieuwkerk** (Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands)

12.45-14.00 Lunch

14.00-14.45 Paper 4: Paper 10: *Boredom and despair in Rural Egypt*  
**Samuli Schielke** (ISIM / Joensuu University, Finland)

14.45-15.30 Paper 5: *Contemporary Islamic Discourses on Music*  
**Jonas Otterbeck** (Malmö University, Sweden)

15.30-15.45 Coffee/tea break

15.45-16.45 KNAW SPONSORED SESSION Islam and the performing arts  
Presentation of the NWO project *'Islam and the performing arts in the Middle East and Europe: from cultural heritage to cultural citizenship'*  
**Joseph Alagha, Yolanda van Tilborgh and Kirsten Squires** (Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands)

16.45-17.30 *Feedback, comments and discussion on the project and general discussion*

17.30-18.30 Reception ('De Kleine Werf')

19.30 Dinner (Restaurant 'de Belhamel', see map)

## PROGRAMME Friday 24 October 2008

09.30-09.45 Coffee

SESSION THREE: Musical cultures

09.45-10.30 Paper 6: *The Islamist Public Sphere in Turkey: Musical Perspectives*  
**Martin Stokes** (Oxford University, Great Britain)

10.30-11.15 Paper 7: *Contesting the cultural terrain of the city: the emergence of rock and metal culture in Istanbul*  
**Pierre Hecker** (University of Leipzig, Germany)

11.15-11.30 Coffee/tea break

SESSION FOUR: Modesty and the market

11.30-12.15 Paper 8: *Southeast Asian boy bands music as it struggles to go global* **Bart Barendregt** (University of Leiden, The Netherlands)

12.15-13.00 Paper 9: *Pious Muslim women's bodies on stage: creativity, modesty and expressiveness*  
**Jeanette Jouili** (ISIM, The Netherlands))

13.00-14.00 Lunch

14.00-14.45 *The Creative Industries, the State, and Neoliberal Islamism in Egypt*  
**Karim Tartoussieh** (New York University, USA)

14.45-15.30 General discussion

15.45-17.00 Future cooperation

19.00 Dinner (Restaurant 'Lieve' see map)



## 5. Statistical information participant

### Age structure

25-40	4
40-50	6
50-60	3
Total	13

### Gender repartition

M	11
F	2
Total	13

### Countries of origin

The Netherlands	6
Finland	1
Denmark	1
Sweden	1
Norway	1
England	1
Germany	1
USA	1

## 6. Final list of participants

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