

RELIGION, CULTURE, AND THE EXCLUSION OF MUSLIM WOMEN: ON FINDING A REIMAGINED FORM OF INCLUSIVE-BELONGING

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ABSTRACT. Though seemingly cocooned by collective values, traditions, dress and ways of understanding, culture is inherently defined by two desires: on the one hand, to preserve that which is perceived to be unchanging, and on the other hand, to resist any change. In its purpose of preservation, it offers a haven of nostalgic comfort – a means through which the self finds identity. In its resistance to change, it makes vulnerable not only its contested nature, but also reveals that what makes it distinctive and exclusive might very well be its weakest point. And yet it would seem that, even when it includes those who resonate with its collective discourse, it might also exclude them on the same basis. In terms of both Muslim culture and religion, a Muslim woman, for example, might be perceived, and therefore constructed, as the custodian of family values, modesty and purity. Yet the very essence that designates her as the custodian of particular values – and therefore at the center of Muslim culture – relegates her to the periphery. While she is included and centrally located on the basis of what she brings in terms of her Muslim identity as daughter, wife and mother, she is excluded on the basis of her gender and sexuality – that is of being a woman. In other words, if she accepts her inclusion as a Muslim woman, she simultaneously has to accept her exclusion as a (Muslim) woman – because that is what ensured her inclusion in the first place. But what exactly excludes and includes her – her religion, her culture, her gender, her sexuality, or her education? By focusing specifically on Muslim women in South Africa, this article contends, firstly, that any Muslim education would necessarily be permeated by culture. To this end, religion and culture cannot be separated. Secondly, if religion and culture cannot be separated, then Muslim women, by virtue of receiving a Muslim education, would also be acculturated. Following this, I will argue that, in order for Muslim women to find a sense of inclusive-belonging, they would need to produce a particular form of knowledge – one that makes a contribution to both education and culture.

Keywords: Muslim women; religion; culture; belonging; inclusive-belonging

1. Muslim Education: A Matrimony of Religion and Culture?

Traditionally, and contestably, religion has often been defined and understood as a particular set of institutionalized beliefs, and dogmas, practiced by individuals in relation to their particular understanding of God, gods or divinity. Like the myriad systems of beliefs, the practices, rituals, customs and traditions that accompany religious enactment and embodiment are equally numerous and complex. Smart (1984), on the one hand, describes religion as being constituted by seven dimensions: ritual; narrative and mythic; experiential and emotional; social and institutional; ethical and legal; doctrinal and philosophical; and material. Derrida (2002), on the other hand, maintains that religion is impossible without uncertainty, because religion never always offers clear meaning or purpose. Indeed, what disturbed Derrida was that all religious traditions brought into question certainty and faith. This would explain his assertion that faith has not always been and will not always be identifiable with religion, nor with theology. Moreover, says Yuval-Davis (2011: 116), religious discourses supply the individual, within specific social and historic contexts, with explicit or implicit answers to particular questions, which she or he might find worthwhile asking.

If religion has generally been understood as a particular interpretation of a particular set of beliefs in relation to a Divine Being, then culture has been understood as referring to the context in which the particular set of beliefs plays out. While religion, says Bonney (2004: 31), might more or less be considered as a process of revelation and to contain the concept of the “faithful,” culture might be considered as a causal agent that affects the evolutionary process by uniquely human means. Drawing on the views of Gramsci, and Foucault, Yuval-Davis (2011: 115) understands cultures as dynamic social processes operating in contested terrains in which different voices become more or less hegemonic in their offered interpretations of the world. This recognizes, states Yuval-Davis, that cultural discourses often will resemble more of a battleground for meaning than a shared point of departure (2011: 115).

Roy (2010: 26) conceives of culture in two ways: the production of symbolic systems, imaginative representations and institutions specific to a society; and the symbolic productions valued socially as an independent aesthetic category (art). In addressing the relationship between religion and culture, Roy (2010: 26) explains that religion is “treated by anthropologists and sociologists as one of several symbolic systems; it is therefore seen as an integral part of a given culture; it is of the culture.” The only time, he continues, that this understanding of religion comes up against an exception is when that religion refuses to be a mere system of beliefs among others, and instead claims to be, or state, the truth. These religions, clarifies Roy, consider themselves to be the bearers of a universal message that transcends

cultures. They therefore lay claim to a relationship with the truth that does not come under the heading of “culture,” since faith sets down a truth beyond the cultural relationship (Roy, 2010: 27).

As do the nature mainstream religions, Islam lays claim to particular universal truths. In this sense it could be argued that Islam, through its centrally divine text, the Qur’an – through its message of social justice, truth, honor and compassion, for instance – might hold a particular universal appeal. However, this claim to universality, argues Roy (2010: 28), can only be fulfilled when religion claims, even abstractly, to be a-cultural – that is, when religion explicitly dissociates itself from culture. And yet the Qur’an is also very particular – both in terms of its audience, and its discourse. As explained by Abu Zayd (2010: 282), the Qur’an is a historical text, which emerged in a very particular context of 7th century Arabia, with the purpose of converting the then inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula from polytheism to a belief in one God. The Qur’an, he explains, responded – both explicitly and implicitly – to a particular historical context and within a particular intellectual milieu. It therefore is quite possible, and necessary, to discern between that which can be understood as the universal component of the Qur’an, and that which is particular to a specific community. Of course, regardless of its centrality to Islam, and therefore to Muslims, the Qur’an cannot offer the only insight into what Islam is. As is every other religion, says Abu Zayd (2010: 283), Islam is the result of the interpretation and experiences of real people – and these people were not living in isolation from other communities and different forms of belief. The spread of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula meant the adoption of various religious ideas as well as cultural practices that have evolved into the present-day eclectic mix, known as Islamic cultural traditions. To Abu Zayd (2010: 284–285), not only did Islam originate from the Arabian Peninsula; it cannot be imagined without the cultural legacy of India, Iran and Indonesia, as well as of Hellenism. That Islam has had a relationship of mutual exchange with other world cultures, argues Abu Zayd, is evident in the multiple forms and interpretations of the religion, and therefore requires a distinction between the Qur’an, as a given fact, and Islam. Religion, he continues, is what people make of it, and in this respect Islam is no different from any other religion. To this end, Abu Zayd (2010: 286) maintains that “one cannot find the meaning of a religion in the text but in the interaction between the text and the historical process, in the interaction between the believer(s)/the communities with their holy texts.”

Besides then, the distinctive context of the Qur’an, there is the dimension of what informs the education of Muslims – and that is the Sunnah, as constituted through the actions and words of the prophet Muhammad. Again, while the education of Muslims might resonate with other mainstream religions, most notably those couched in monotheism, Muslims are expected

to live in accordance with the codified life of the prophet Muhammad. And here it is possible to identify common traits among the prophets of the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – such as steadfastness, trustworthiness, piety, as well as the historical fact that all three faiths originated in what is known today as the Arab world. And yet, Muhammad’s experiences, both as a prophet and as a man, were decidedly different from those of Noah, Moses or Jesus, as was his human nature, and therefore his fallibilities – which were both recognized, and at times admonished, in the Qur’an. The argument being made here is, firstly, that Muslims draw their foundational understandings of Islam from the Qur’an, which, while containing a universal message of social justice and truth, also is very particular in terms of its discourse and an audience that was overwhelmingly controlled by tribal ethics, and not by state or legal systems as, for example, was the case with Jesus when he encountered the Roman empire. Secondly, Muslims are expected to emulate the actions and ideas of the prophet Muhammad – a man whose humanity is brought to the fore repeatedly in the Qur’an. What this means is that the primary sources of both knowledge and education are derived from strongly contextualized origins and particular practices. This demonstrates Roy’s (2010: 26) point that religion emanates from representations and institutions specific to a society, which, therefore, not only makes religion of the culture, but attempts to deculturate religion will result in the loss of the social expression of religion (2010: 8). Moreover, as discussed by Davids and Waghid (2014: 1490), the Qur’an itself proclaims to be a text for all times and places, and its (con)textual manifestations will always be subjected to (re)interpretations as Muslims endeavor to live their lives in ethical conduct and obedience to the dictates of its primary sources. Failing to do so, they continue, would not only render the primary sources superfluous, but also undermine the constant possibilities to think anew and to enhance the new re-beginnings so necessary for the advocacy of Muslim education.

By dismissing the dichotomy between religion and culture, I am not arguing that the two are the same. It is of course possible to draw a distinction between religion as code or doctrine, and culture as ritual and practice. But doctrine does not find expression in doctrine; doctrine is made visible through lived expressions, and these lived expressions are inherently enframed in particular constructions of culture. In dismissing a dichotomous understanding of religion and culture, I am contending that, while and because religion is immersed in culture, culture is necessarily immersed in religion. As such, religion and culture are inextricably intertwined in the individual, and in the community. Ideas and expressions of religion and culture co-exist and co-relate on a continuum, wholly dependent on the individual and communal experience and expression thereof. At this point it is important to draw attention to my deliberate use of education in Islam, or

Islamic education, as opposed to Muslim education. On the one hand my decision to draw a distinction between Islamic education and Muslim education stems from what Douglas and Shaikh (2004: 8) refer to as the poorly nuanced use of the word “Islamic.” They contend that the descriptor “Islamic” is often used interchangeably and inconsistently to describe doctrines of Islam as well as the practices of Muslims. This description, according to Douglas and Shaikh (2004: 5), often fails to take into account that which pertains directly to Islam, as in its tenets of faith, as opposed to that which its adherents perform in the cultural or social realm, which can be categorized more accurately as “Muslim education” (2004: 5). On the other hand, the use of Muslim education as opposed to Islamic education is linked to Roy’s (2010: 9) questioning of what is understood as a “pure religion,” in which there is a demand for a return to explicit religious norms – free from any associations with other cultural symbolic systems. Like Roy, I question whether it would be possible to understand the Qur’an without taking into consideration the historical context in which it was revealed, and thereafter propagated. Islamic education in its pure form necessarily would have to be quite different from Muslim education – since education itself is given shape and meaning by the one who pursues it, thereby always leaving it open to interpretation. It therefore would be difficult, contend Davids and Waghid (2014: 1490), to consider a conception of knowledge in Islam without considering its indelible allegiances to cultural practices informed by both revealed and non-revealed sources of education.

2. Muslim Women, Muslim Education and Acculturation

Martin (2000) has combined the terms black and woman – forming blackwoman – in order to show the connection between race and gender. Similarly, Sherman (2005) has combined the terms black and American – forming blackamerican – to show the connection between race and citizenship. Following suit, Cooke (2008: 91) constructs the neologism “Muslimwoman” to illustrate how the veil, real or imagined, functions like race, a marker of essential difference, which Muslim women seemingly cannot escape. Muslim woman, explains Cooke (2008: 91), draws attention to the emergence of a new, singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical and even philosophical diversity. She continues that “Muslim women are outsider/insiders within Muslim communities where, to belong, their identity increasingly is tied to the idea of the veil. As Muslims, they are negotiating cultural outsider/insider roles in Muslim-minority societies” (Cooke, 2008: 91). But it is not just within their roles in Muslim-minority countries that Muslim women struggle to negotiate their cultural outsider/insider roles. Patriarchal

constructions of Islam have always tied the establishment of its parameters in relation to issues surrounding women. Consequently, dominant debates have not been about Muslim men. Instead, they continue to be about women in relation to veiling (dress code), marriage, inheritance, divorce, sexuality, purity, modesty and education. In post-apartheid South African society, the Muslim community has been trapped in hostile exchanges regarding the establishment of a Muslim Marriages Bill. The intention of the bill is to provide a legal framework that will counter the entrenched inequality to which Muslim women continue to be subjected in the event of the dissolution of the marriage, or if the husband dies intestate. Previous debates centered around the access of women to mosques – commonly referred to as the “women in mosques campaign.”

What both the “women in mosques campaign” and the ongoing campaign for the recognition of the Muslim Marriages Bill represent are two stark dissimilarities between what is presented by education in Islam, and how that education is re-presented when it comes into contact with a particular community and culture. The Qur’an, as one of the primary sources of education in Islam, advocates, above all else, for equality between men and women, accompanied by just action (*ikraam*) in dealings with all of humanity. In reference to chapter 33: 35 of the Qur’an (*Surah al-Ahzab*), which addresses women directly in affirming their equality to men, Ahmed (1992: 64) states, “Balancing virtues and ethical qualities, as well as concomitant rewards, in one sex with the precisely identical virtues and qualities in the other, the passage makes a clear statement about the absolute identity of the human moral condition and the common and identical spiritual and moral obligations placed on all individuals regardless of sex.” Moreover, the Qur’an continuously reminds Muslims that the acquisition of goodness (*taqwah*) ought to be the foundational principle of their education, and hence their engagements with others. It therefore would be irrational and disingenuous to attempt to substantiate any practices of unjust treatment – such as excluding women from access to the mosque, or not affording them rights to financial support in the event of divorce or death – on the basis of Qur’anic exegeses (*tafāsīr*).

Stowasser (1994: 5) describes the centrality of Muslim women in debates in and about Islam as symbolic of the primary aspects of “Islamic struggle for the maintenance of indigenous values and cultural authenticity.” Unfortunately for Muslim women, notions of indigenous values and cultural authenticity have been interwoven intricately into very particular constructions and, at times, oppressive understandings of domesticity and invisibility. In medieval Islam, explains Stowasser (1994: 98), domesticity was defined as the “core of female social righteousness, indeed the crucial criterion of a Muslim woman’s true citizenship in the community of her faith.” In her traditional roles as wife and mother, the Muslim woman, says

Stowasser (1994: 7), is not only expected to fight a holy war for the sake of Islamic values, in which her conduct, domesticity and dress are vital for the survival of the Islamic way of life, but religion, morality and culture stand and fall with her. In her representation of the sanctity of Muslim family life, and hence society, a Muslim woman's social role and responsibility are inherently linked to moral purpose. In terms of Muslim theology, a Muslim woman as mother is considered three times more honorable than a Muslim father. This particular honor, in terms of wife and mother and as the custodian of family values, modesty and purity, places a Muslim woman at the center of both the Islamic religion and Muslim culture. Yet, it would appear that the "holy war" Muslim women are expected to fight for the "survival of the Islamic way of life" might be at the cost of their own individuality. It would appear that, in accepting her centrality as the custodian of Islamic values, she has to accept that not only is her designated role confined strictly to one of domesticity, but the qualities that afford the designation of custodian of Islamic values are the very same qualities that ensure her exclusion. What this means is that inasmuch as a Muslim woman's role as wife and mother centralizes her and includes her in the custody of Islamic values, her sexuality excludes her from any decision making on how her roles and responsibilities ought to be enacted. Stated differently, in accepting her inclusion as the custodian of Islamic values by virtue of being a Muslim wife and mother, she inadvertently accepts her exclusion by virtue of being a Muslim woman.

Yet, while Islam both designates and recognizes her role and responsibility in relation to the preservation of Islamic values – as it does of the Muslim male and father – it does not construct this responsibility as exclusive of anything that happens outside of the family or home. In other words, the preservation of Islamic values is not restricted to a domestic understanding thereof. Rather, the preservation of Islamic values necessarily relates to the core injunctions of Islamic education – namely the acquisition of goodness (taqwah) or virtue. Drawing on Al-Attas's (1977: 11) understanding that Islamic education is about recognizing God so that the individual might recognize him- or herself, the purpose, ultimately, is to produce a good person. The production of this good person is not context bound – it is neither inside nor outside the home, it is neither exclusively socially nor exclusively individually based. So, in this sense, Muslim education transcends the outsider/insider dichotomy to which Cooke (2008) refers, and restores the agency of the individual by virtue of his or her autonomous relationship with God, and with others. The transcendence of the outsider/insider dichotomy is constituted and cultivated through three discernable, yet inter-related, epistemological and ethical practices, namely tarbiyyah (socialization), ta'lim (critical engagement), and ta'dib (social activism). These three practices not only provide Muslims with the

foundational understandings of their faith, but underscore that understandings of faith are inherently couched in the social expression thereof.

The practices of tarbiyyah, ta'lim and ta'dīb, therefore, make it possible for Muslims to advance the social responsibility of Islam – which is to enact just action. To this end, it becomes clear that the mere acquisition of knowledge in Islam does not constitute education. Knowledge in Islam, explain Davids and Waghid (2014: 1485), is not differentiated between that which is secular and that which is sacred. Knowledge is extracted from two distinct knowledge forms, namely “ulum al-aqli” [knowledge of the rational, human and sciences] and “ulum al-naqli” [knowledge of the revealed sciences], as encapsulated in the primary sources of the Qur'an and the Ahādīth [prophetic utterances and conduct]. These two forms of knowledge, continue Davids and Waghid (2014: 1485–1486), are not mutually exclusive, because in terms of the epistemologies of tarbiyyah (socialization), ta'lim (critical engagement) and ta'dīb (social activism), any conceptualization of knowledge ought to have intellectual, judgmental and ethical ramifications. Knowledge, explains Al-Attas (2005: 23), only becomes education when it is accompanied by moral purpose – such as just action. In this sense, Islamic education – that is education derived from a deculturated Islam – cannot be associated with or used to evoke any form of social injustice, such as the exclusion of Muslim women or any other individual. Because it draws its meaning from those with whom it interacts, however, and therefore is influenced by both the one who pursues it, and in the context in which it is lived – whether 7th century Arabia or 21st century South Africa – Muslim education is always open to interpretation, and therefore should be open to question.

Thus far I have shown that, unless religion succeeds in completely dislodging itself from its surrounding context – thereby depending exclusively on religious norms –, it always is given shape by the culture through which it finds expression. The implication of this nexus between religion and culture is that the Muslim education that Muslim women are privy to always will be acculturated. In other words, what distinguishes a South African Muslim woman from her Saudi Arabian, Pakistani or British counterpart is not her views on the centrality of the Qur'an as the core source of Muslim education. Instead, the distinction lives in the interpretation of this source – which finds expression in whether she is allowed an education, whether she is allowed to speak to non-relative men, whether she is allowed to drive a car, or indeed, the extent to which she is expected to veil. These aspects, depending on whether the Muslim woman lives in a minority or majority Muslim country, will either increase or decrease her visibility. In the concluding section of this article I will argue that, in order for Muslim women to find a sense of inclusive-belonging, they will need to produce a

particular form of knowledge – one that makes a contribution to both education and culture.

3. Inclusive Belonging Through Embodied Narration

While issues of dress code, purity, sexuality and modesty have long dominated the debates surrounding Muslim women – both in minority and majority Muslim countries – little attention has been given to the implications of exclusion on a Muslim woman’s sense of belonging within her own religious-cultural community. While it might be easier to draw attention to the plight of Muslim women through the Muslim Marriages Bill or the “women in mosques campaign,” there are other forms of inequality that are more intimate, but equally revealing of the disjuncture between Muslim women as wife and mother – for whom there might be inclusion, and Muslim women as sexual beings – for whom there might be exclusion. A study conducted by Hoel and Shaikh (2013), for example, which explored the ambivalent religious discourses that inform South African Muslim women’s understandings of sex and sexual praxis, highlights how dominant religious concepts of sexuality intersect with marital dynamics to produce particular forms of female subjectivity. Hoel and Shaikh (2013: 79) found that positive views of sexuality in the Muslim tradition are not necessarily associated with views that are affirming of women – “Muslim legal and social traditions include the belief that a marriage contract legally establishes a relationship where a wife is to be constantly available for sex to her husband in exchange for maintenance and dower.” Moreover, they conclude that Muslim women’s notions of the self are informed by gendered understandings of the God-believer relationship, including notions of what constitutes worship or devotion (*iba-dah*). This means that many of the women in the study appeared to prioritize male sexual desires over their own (Hoel & Shaikh, 2013: 69). It would appear that, in the latter example, the Muslim’s woman’s agency submerges into her responsibility as a Muslim wife. Her religious responsibility and obedience as a sexually submissive wife are embodied and understood in relation to her piety as a Muslim woman.

Belonging, says Yuval-Davis (2011: 12), can take many different forms, which not only vary from person to person in a concrete or abstract way, but also in a stable, contested or transient way. In clarifying her understanding of the notion of social and political belonging, Yuval-Davis (2011: 12) differentiates between three major analytical facets in which belonging is constructed – which are interrelated but cannot be reduced to each other. The first facet of social locations, says Yuval-Davis (2011: 12–13), refers to a particular sex, race, class or nation, age group, kinship group, or a certain

profession to which people belong. Social locations, she explains, even in their most stable format, are virtually never constructed along one power vector of difference. The second facet relates to people's identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings. For Yuval-Davis (2011: 14), identities are not just personal, but also collective, and collective identity narratives provide a collective sense of order and meaning. Crucial to the construction and reproduction of identity narratives and constructions of attachment, she continues, are specific repetitive practices, relating to specific social and cultural spaces that link individual and collective behavior (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 15–16). As such, says Yuval-Davis (2011: 16), identity is not only constructed in dialogue (that is between the individual and others, or the collective), but the dialogical construction of identity is both reflective and constitutive – “It is not individual or collective, but involves both, in an in-between state of ‘becoming,’ in which processes of identity construction, authorization, and contestation take place.” The third facet relates to ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others' belonging. Belonging, argues Yuval-Davis (2011: 18), is not just about social locations and constructions of individual and collective identities and attachments; it also is concerned with the ways these are assessed and valued by the self and others.

The social locations of Muslim women – particularly in Muslim-majority countries – have traditionally placed them in the home, thereby ensuring their core responsibilities of domesticity and family. While this might be less the case for Muslim women in Muslim-minority countries such as South Africa, where Muslim women might be more active outside of the home, fulfilling various professional or occupational roles, the likelihood of exclusion and discrimination remains. This is so because it is the private space of the home in which Muslim women appear to experience the most prejudice, and the public sphere might be more prepared to see her as a female individual, rather than as a Muslim woman. While collective identity narratives might provide a sense of order – as Yuval-Davis argues – this order might be both contestable and de-individuating. Collective identity, like the power vector of difference inherent in the social locations of Muslim women, does not imply collective consensus about that identity. It merely implies hegemony of a particular collectivity, which might have succeeded in relegating dissensus into subdued silence. This means that, even when Muslim women know that they are being excluded or discriminated against by Muslim men in their community, they are unlikely to contest it, since doing so might lead to further exclusion, because their contestation would be viewed as the undermining of an embodied religious understanding, rather than a questioning of a culturally-based male-biased interpretation. Similarly, while the idea of a dialogical construction of identity is appealing

in its spaces of reflexivity, it presupposes an equal opportunity of, and for, dialogue. If Muslim women, for example, view their own sexuality as being only in service to their husbands, and not in terms of their own identity and desires as sexual beings, or if they are left unaccounted for in the event of a divorce, then the idea of an equally constructed dialogical construction becomes questionable. Both the social locations and dialogical positioning of women raise critical questions not only about what exactly excludes Muslim women from full participation in their identities as Muslim women, but also what Muslim women should do to ensure a sense of inclusive belonging.

Of course, the aforementioned discussion raises important questions about the role of Muslim women in relation to their own understandings of and engagements with the primary sources of Islam. And here one has to take note of Wadud's (2006: 19) criticism that, to the average Muslim woman and man, Islam is whatever has been inherited culturally and ethically: "Since they are Muslim, they do Islam." In agreement with Wadud, Barlas (2002: 3) contends that unless Muslim women understand the liberatory aspects of Qur'anic teachings, they cannot contest the association, falsely constructed by misreading scripture, between sacred and sexual oppression. Clearly, as has been discussed, a claim of belonging to a particular community does not preclude Muslim women from being excluded on the basis of particular cultural contexts and understandings. What, then, can Muslim women do to find a sense of belonging both as religious and cultural beings, since religion and culture, it would appear, interplay on a continuum of expression?

Returning to Yuval-Davis's (2011: 214–216) understanding of belonging in relation to identity: she argues that it is the collective construction of identity – related to specific social and cultural spaces – that links individual and collective behavior and therefore provides a collective sense of order and meaning. This implies that, if the individual and collective behavior are not linked, the collective construction of identity probably might not ensue, thereby not providing a collective sense of order and meaning. From this it can be argued that, if Muslim women wish to belong to a reimagined community of full inclusion, they would need to alter their own identity so that they might disrupt the collective identity. As such, two premises would need to be established. Firstly, Muslim women should take responsibility for their own constructions of identity by taking responsibility for their own education. This would mean detaching their religious/social/cultural/sexual agency from the male bias. It also would mean establishing a new collective dialogue with other women so that a new collective identity takes shape, which might stand in support of, or in contestation to, an existing (and perhaps, dominant) dialogue. With a shift towards a re-imagined collective identity – one that is driven by autonomous agency rather than by engendered forms of being and action in relation to (male) others – the

insecurity of both the collective and the individual dissipates in relation to how centrally they construct their identities. If Yuval-Davis (2011: 14) is correct in her contention that identity narratives are constructed through specific repetitive practices, then it is up to Muslim women – if they wish to (re)claim their collective belonging – to restrain these repetitive practices through (re)establishing their own practices of fairness, equality and inclusion.

The second premise relates to what it means to belong to a culture, and to be acculturated. Inasmuch as culture defines and plays a central role in the identities and identity narratives of Muslim women – as it would among any other group – cultural discourses, says Yuval-Davis (2011: 115), resemble more a battleground for meaning than a shared point of departure. The idea, therefore, that ideas and practices are incontestable because they are couched in a cultural discourse is a problematic one. That Muslim women in South Africa are linked to particular cultures and cultural discourses is evident in the heterogeneity of dress codes, wedding rituals, which vary from a week to one day; or the practice of returning to her mother's home after giving birth until she has fully recovered from her post-partum condition. So the claim to a culture is indisputable. But, if the Muslim woman is to (re)assert her identity and understanding onto this culture, her participation and belonging to the culture should be shaped by a duty of individual and collective self-criticism. In other words, she should be prepared to criticize herself in relation to both her attachment to, and detachment from, her culture. This is so because, if culture is meant to signify and transform identity, then identity is meant to signify and transform culture. To my mind, this is significant because, unlike culture, which is to a large extent defined by rituals and traditions, identity by its nature is constitutive of transformation. Muslim women, like any other collective, cannot lay claim to a stable identity. These identities therefore are perpetually in transformation and, if they are constitutive of culture, then culture cannot be outside of those through whom it is signified.

Taking the aforementioned two premises into account, I will now turn my attention to the type of knowledge that Muslim women would need to produce in order to lay claim to a sense of inclusive-belonging. Given, as I have argued, that the Muslim education that Muslim men and women are privy to is indeed shaped by religious and cultural discourses, any form of knowledge produced by Muslim women therefore also would have to make a contribution to both education and culture. Such a contribution would necessitate an awareness not only of an understanding and engagement with the foundational sources of Islam – namely the Qur'an and Sunnah – but an engagement with these sources in relation to the context that the Muslim woman finds herself. Her agency, therefore, depends on how well she navigates the intersections between Muslim education and culture, and the

extent to which she is able both to attach herself to and detach herself from either or both. Stated differently, her agency depends on the construction of new collective identities and dialogues that are willing to engage in self-criticism. The type of knowledge that is likely to emerge from such a stance is one that takes into account the instability of both religion and culture. It takes into account that both religion and culture become what they become by virtue of their beliefs and subjectivities. While it is possible to discern between that which is sacred and that which is not, or that which is pure religion and that which is not, it is not possible to separate the production of knowledge into one that is sacred and another that is not. This is so because the production of knowledge necessitates human agency, and human agency is never sacred; it is always contaminated by bias and culture. This is exactly why the Qur'an does not differentiate between sacred and non-sacred knowledge. Instead, it distinguishes between knowledge that is beneficial and knowledge that is not. To this end, it is as beneficial to Muslim women, as it is to Muslim men, as it is to Islam to reconceive the type of knowledge that propagates any lines of injustice and exclusion. The Muslim woman's contribution to her Muslim education resides in her critical engagement and her willingness to find her voice so that she might express her Muslim identity, rather than waiting for it to be defined externally by (male) others. Her inclusive-belonging therefore is contingent on her autonomous agency. If she is able to engage critically with the foundational sources, her engagement itself yields a reimagined type of knowledge. Her contribution to her culture lies in both her recognition and disruption thereof. This disruption is not only necessary – given the unstable and contested terrain of culture – but it is the only way to establish the spaces for new forms of knowledge production. These new forms of knowledge will find easy expression through the practices of tarbiyyah (socialization), ta'lim (critical engagement), and ta'dib (social activism) – which inherently recognize and propagate the understanding of faith as a social expression of responsibility to oneself and others.

In contesting the dichotomous relationship between religion and culture, I have shown that religion is always permeated by culture – which means that practices, particularly those that lead to exclusion and discrimination, need to be contested on both religious and cultural grounds. Laying claim to belonging to a community does not translate into full participation or inclusion – depending on who controls the hegemonic discourse, belonging shifts from the center to the periphery. Following this, I have argued that if Muslim women desire a sense of inclusive-belonging, they would need to enact their belonging through taking responsibility for and engendering agency in their own religious and cultural identities. Thus, any form of knowledge produced by Muslim women therefore would need to be both cognizant of, and make a contribution to, education and culture.

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