WOMEN'S ISLAM

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AMONG WOMEN IN TODAY'S IRAN

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

In this book I will focus on two socio-cultural domains – the family and religious activity in the lives of Iranian women. Women maintain the integrity of the household, while at the same time taking part in wider social activities. With this background I explore the religious practice among today's Shirazi women, its transcendental and pragmatic aspects, specifying women's performance in religious rituals.

At my father's home

The main reason for choosing my home city of Shiraz, in south-western Iran, as a setting for my research was not simply a matter of research convenience.[1] I anticipated that the quest would be both emotionally and methodologically challenging. A combination of my education and experience in 'exotic' Europe made it possible for me to observe my home country with a new consciousness and comparative insight. Political insecurity, war and economic barriers had hindered such a visit until 1989.

The return to my father's home after ten years abroad was for me as dramatic an experience as it might be for a foreign visitor coming to Iran for the first time. I returned to my father's home as a married, educated daughter of the family. My position was such that I was independent, and yet my children and I were still under the protection of my parents. Soon after my arrival I found myself to be engaged in sets of relations which were important to my parents, relatives and acquaintances, and gradu-

[1]This is an accusation sometimes levelled at non-Western indigenous anthropologists as against Western social scientists studying their home communities.

ally I became incorporated into their everyday activities and concerns. These social relations included, among others, activities such as religious rituals and exchanges of visits.

The visiting pattern of my community was such that from the day of my arrival, close and distant relatives came to pay tribute to my family and to welcome me home. I was welcomed with gifts of flowers, or small Iranian handicrafts thought to be of interest to those living abroad, and even a tray of homemade bread baked by my childhood nanny. Then it was my duty to return their visits, whether in response to an invitation, or at my own initiative. For those who were closest to my family I brought some small gifts from abroad. A customary pattern of mutual visits, with or without gifts, kept a balance of reciprocity in social relations and value exchanges. I could not give a gift in return to all my relatives, but my mother, who often intervened to protect my social honour, made excuses, arguing that I was a student.

My original research proposal was not concerned with the study of women's religion, but soon I learned that women were engaged in important religious activity that until then had escaped my attention. On the second day of my arrival I participated in the annual memorial service (*sar-sāl*) of a close relative in which the entire Qur'ānic chapter of *anām* (Qur'ān: 6) was recited. One of the female preachers, who was a distant relative, was impressed by my interest and invited me to attend her Qu'rānic meetings further.

Subsequently I participated in several Qur'ānic meetings led by my distant relative. The meetings were usually held in a small room in a private home packed with up to twenty women, some bringing their school-age daughters and young sons as well. There I was informed about other religious meetings, and soon I became interested in the way these meetings were performed, interrelated, organised and led by women. Eventually I began to participate on a regular basis.

Coming from Europe to be a Qur'ānic student?

The women in my surroundings found my curiosity and regular questions on Islamic matters both admirable and puzzling. Some of my upper-middle and middle-class relatives, who were less involved in religious matters, were particularly puzzled by my

interest in spending hours at religious meetings on hot summer days when the temperature often reached 42° C. Some thought that I should rather go window shopping with them, or visit relatives. By contrast others, who were engaged in religious activities and took part in religious meetings and Qur'ānic lessons, admired my interest and were willing to take me wherever they went.

Despite not sharing many of the views of my informants, the fact that I am an Iranian and have lived half of my life in Iran provided me with a guideline for pursuing my anthropological inquiries in a more native manner. I carried out my study independently of official authorities. I was able to come into contact with women with different degrees of religious beliefs and involvement, and I participated with them in as many social and religious events as possible. I expressed to the women I met daily a willingness to attend events to which I was invited, or which were open to the public.

I felt a series of rights and duties towards my relatives quite apart from my academic research plan. As a mother with two children aged 7 and 10, I experienced and shared some of the social constraints typical for Iranian mothers, such as spending a lot of time in crowded clinics, or queuing up to purchase parents' ration goods. However, having a mother and sisters nearby reduced my work with my children, enabling me to move more freely and with less worry. I also spent much of my free time visiting other families and female friends in social and religious events.

As a native Iranian anthropologist, and living in my father's home in the old part of the city, my observation and social involvement was not confined to one particular quarter of the town, but was extensive and widespread. I chose to adopt a flexible form of contact and to follow secular and religious events. By utilising both my own female relatives, as well as other lines of social contact, I was able to observe a variety of ritual situations, exploring the formulation of women's religious activity and family lives. Hence I was able to develop a model of their everyday life.

Participant observation

I started my anthropological observation from participating within a known social network of relatives, and gradually extended this to the unknown local neighbourhood, with whom I had daily social interaction, and extended my contact to their friends. I followed these women in different social and religious fields: such as private religious meetings, shrines, the mosques, funerals and visiting graveyards, as well as my relatives and family friends, evening window shopping, and wedding parties. Through such relations my observation and participation was not confined to one particular ritual, but was extended to a wide range of activities, which again generated broader social relations.

My observations were largely carried out in the densely populated part of the city, where most of the lower- and middle-class families live. This is also the part of town where many of the shrines and mosques are located, as well as the main bāzār. The background of the middle-class women varied. Some were semi-educated or educated housewives, whose husbands were well-off *hajji* merchants, shopkeepers, traders, civil servants, or educated engineers. Other women were religious experts, educated preachers, religious teachers, employees in the civil service, students, schoolgirls, or former wage workers.

To me, participant observation is not only a matter of acting as a native, but emotionally feeling as a native, sharing tasks and taking responsibility. My fieldwork was an experience of intense social involvement, of both observing and participating actively, renewing old relations with my relatives and friends, as well as fulfilling my rights and duties towards older relatives.

My participant observation was passive in the sense that I conducted my observation in the religious meetings (*rowżeh*), staying in the background for hours, reading whatever participants read, and listening to male and female preachers. My participation was active in the sense that my fieldwork involved me in deeper social, personal, and emotional relations, with mutual and continuous feelings of rights and obligations.

I could hardly remain formal in questioning those who were associated with me as relatives and friends; nor could I use a tape recorder, being aware that this might alienate and embarrass them. They often had a positive conception of life in Europe,

and one woman expressing a slight envy of me said, 'You have neither the problem of high prices nor the hot summer weather in Iran.' Being identified as an expatriate Iranian was often the equivalent of being attributed with the prestigious status of 'well educated' or 'modern', liberated, well-off and secular. They generally believed that women in Europe were very concerned with their looks and clothing, and were surprised to hear that this was not necessarily so. I was surprised to see the amount of time and money the upper- and middle-class Iranian women spent on their social appearance, compared to the average Iranian immigrant women in Norway.

Collection of data

My data was collected mainly during my first fieldwork, especially during the six months of Ramaẓān, Shawwal, Dhul-Qa'adah, Dhul-Hījjah, Muharam and Safar of the Islamic calendar (March-August 1989). My second fieldwork covered the months of Muharam, Safar and Rabi-ul-Awwal (June-August 1994). However, the data for my book as a whole is also a product of a longer social and deeper cultural engagement, and cannot be confined to my fieldwork period alone. Furthermore, my material was cross-checked through my continuous contact with some of my main female informants (e.g. letters and telephone calls), by reading local newspapers, and in 1995, returned to Iran on a short visit to attend the funeral of a close relative.

As an Iranian middle-class woman having one third of my life experience abroad, I knew very little about Arabic and Qur'ānic text and prayers. My knowledge on Iranian culture in general and Islam in particular gradually increased along with my graduate and post-graduate studies in anthropology. During my fieldwork in Iran, I often rewrote my notes in detail after returning home from the field. I did not always remember the whole speech given by a preacher, particularly if it involved Arabic and Qur'ānic verses. I was, therefore, fortunate to have my mother and several other female relatives accompanying me at the religious meetings. Their engagement was not due to me and my research, but was part of their own local social network. I checked my notes with them to ensure I had all the information and had understood the speeches correctly. They often told me not to be afraid to ask the preacher herself, as they

appreciated the religious interest of educated young women. The Iranian political propaganda in the mass media often criticised expatriates who in one way or another were associated with the West, attacking them for creating a false Muslim identity, and for giving a negative picture of the political struggle of the country on their return abroad. In 1994 the security of the female religious arenas became endangered by several explosions in a shrine (e.g. July 1994 in the Shrine of Imām Reza in Mashhad). Security was tightened and women and their bags were checked by guards at the entrance. This development, along with the general and official view of the 'researcher' being synonymous with internal and external 'spies', made my work in the public arena difficult. It was always hard to know how to interact with the government officials as an Iranian expatriate, without giving the impression of being a 'foreign agent'.

In 1994 I returned to Iran for a second period of fieldwork, and since I only had a few months I had to be more specific about my tasks. I immediately started renewing my participation in the *rowżeh* meetings. I now felt better informed and more familiar with holy texts and ritual problems. I found that I was not the only one taking notes during religious meetings, and I saw several young participants, either students, or middle-class housewives, taking notes of sermons. Also some of my co-*rowżeh* goers took notes of the sermons and blessing verses (*do'ā*), in order to read them later on for increased efficacy.

The religious life of women

The anthropology of Islam, despite its wide range of studies and branches, has contributed little to the study of Muslim women's Islamic beliefs and practices in general, and to Iran in particular. Despite the fact that Iranian women have increasingly become an object of interdisciplinary research studies (since the Islamic political turmoil in Iran in the 1980s), they are often treated as an object of religio-political rhetorics (Thaiss 1978; Fischer 1980). Researchers have not paid enough attention to women's own account of Islamic thought and religious involvement.

It has not been as prestigious to study the sociology of Muslim women's religious practices and organisation, when compared to dominant themes such as women's status and position in the Muslim world, and we are only recently beginning to gain an

understanding of the involvement of women in Islamic religion and practices in Muslim societies. Among the books and papers we may name are the unpublished Ph.D. thesis of Altorki (1977), Betteridge (1980), Beck (1980), Fernea and Fernea (1972), Friedl (1980), Haeri (1989), Jamzadeh and Mills (1986), with fieldwork prior to Iranian revolution in 1979; and from other parts of the Middle East, Bowen (1993), Holy (1991), Early (1993) and Buitelaar (1994), Starr (1992), Tapper and Tapper (1987), Tett (1994). These studies show that women are no less concerned than men with religious performance, piety and duties.

This book will argue that the participation and activity of Iranian women in the religious arena is neither muted, nor obscure; and that as a result of the Islamic development in Iran, the women's religious activity has become more visible, both in terms of control and involvement.

Islam and gender

The classical anthropologist's approach to the study of Muslim women reflects a view that women are excluded from public religion, and from participating fully in Islamic rituals carried out in and around mosques and theological schools. I will argue that although Iranian women may not play a leading role in the mosque, they do play an important religious role in other complex forms of organisation, such as the social network of the home and the exclusive female religious houses.

There are at least two problems confronting a student of Muslim society. First, one has often focused on the exotic institution of Islam and the visible religious space of the mosque and schools. Since Muslim women do not play leading roles in rituals at the mosque, and since they therefore have not been readily accessible and visible to the male observer, it has often been assumed that female religious activity and knowledge is non-existent. Second, Muslim women are hazily designated as the protectors of religion in the home without researchers even taking into account its Islamic core and organisational pattern (see also Dwyer 1978:585).

The space of the home has often been regarded by feminist symbolic anthropologists as the women's minimal institution and a muted analytical category for all internal purposes (cf. Nelson 1974; Yanagisako 1979). The public life, such as politics,

economic productivity and religious activities, have in the tradition of Islamic studies been tied to male culture, while private matters are associated with female (Ortner 1974). Islam has often been represented as a conservative force and not subject to women's controls. Islam has commonly been interpreted as a sexual ideology of the Islamic patriarchy (Mernissi 1975; Afshar 1982) where women are submitted to patriarchal structures. The students of Muslim societies influenced by such a classical feminist approach often associate Muslim women with nature and uncontrolled passion, and men with culture and political, economic, and religious rationality ('aghal). I study the individual actors as participants in a number of different fields or arenas of connected activities, such as women's religious life and household activities and the construction of the social person with respect to these. I also highlight the effect of wider political, economic and religious developments upon the construction of the person. The social reality of the everyday life of a person is integrated with respect to different fields of organisation (Barth 1992; Grønhaug 1976).

Islamic knowledge: text or practice

The anthropological perspective on Islam has largely been influenced by the Western intellectual reasoning, where the textual authority is treated as superior knowledge (Lambek 1990:23). Furthermore, it has been a gendered knowledge with the male elite as available informants in Islamic society. Its analytical and methodological core is based according to a fixed knowledge of text, scripture and learned male informants.

In European academic thought men are considered to be prominent in Islamic organisation; it is they who perform culturally important Islamic rituals. As a result most writings about Islamic beliefs and practices concern male, not female, participants and experts. The anthropology of religion developed, like most of the anthropological sub-disciplines, in the study of non-literate and inclusive societies (Malinowski, 1954). However, many ethnographers fell into the classical trap and remained ignorant of the women's religious ritual activity. According to Weiner this includes Malinowski as well (1989:12). Among researchers in the anthropology of Islam, the image of Islam has remained a masculine one (Holy, 1991:44), most being limited to

scientific reports about beliefs and practices which concerned male but not women as participants and Islamic experts.

The traditional dominance of the scripturalist and intellectual elite in general remain a determinant issue in the study of the process of reproduction of Islamic knowledge (see also Fernea and Fernea 1972:39; Eickelman 1980). This underlines the constitutive nature of the process for production of (Islamic) knowledge (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The above-mentioned scholars argue that the literature on Islam has long been dominated by the assumptions and methods of Orientalists and Islamic theologians, focusing on the presumed unity of orthodox beliefs and practices while dismissing popular Islam and thereby ignoring a systematic study of women's beliefs.

I believe that the issue of Islam in practice has much to do with a field of discourse in which a consideration of both moral order and ritual performance is necessary. Leoffler (1988) is one of the few anthropologists who take into account the Islam in practice in Iran. In this study the fieldwork mainly involves interviewing male Iranians from different social classes and professional categories, such as mullahs, craftsmen, students, teachers, peasants, etc. so as to study their actual Islamic beliefs. The study does not include women. Having better access to religious men than religious women appears to be a common methodological problem among Islamic students, both foreign and native. The sex of the anthropologist is an important factor in the development of a network of informants in the field. A native male ethnographer from the local university told me that he had made an effort to do a study on women's religious meetings, but he was only allowed to sit behind a curtain to observe one of his female relatives' religious meetings. His sphere of experience as a male anthropologist did not allow the extent of his knowledge to go beyond the curtain.

There is no doubt that the religious beliefs and practices of Muslim women are even more inaccessible to the non-native male outsider. This is mainly due to the culturally required segregation of sexes and gendered spaces. Due to the exclusion of women the male researcher has practically no access to the women's sphere of religious activity.

This may be one of the explanations to the different insights among male and female researchers. One may assume, therefore,

that the general formulation of Islam and gender has had a male elite bias (Mernissi 1991a).[2]

The dominant role of the elite as informants in the scientific works of Islam

Much of the ethnography on the cosmology and rituals of Islam has emerged from educated male informants with the visible public role and ability to explain matters to Western experts.

Many of the local male and female religious teachers who tried to assist me in my study argued that I should focus upon the knowledge that could be drawn from recognised religious books and Islamic texts, or talk to prominent preachers, rather than spend time at women's religious meetings. They made an effort to assist me by putting forward what they thought to be politically and scientifically important and necessary for introducing Islam to Europeans and non-Muslims. They often dictated male concepts of Islam and ignored the importance of the religious practices and beliefs of the women.

A male religious teacher from a girls' high school gave me a list of recent religious publications on Islamic family laws, and the economic and sexual rights and duties of husbands and wives (Mutaheri 1975). These are popular topics that have emerged since the Islamic revolution, and about which there have been published a large number of books by high-ranking male theologians and authors. On another occasion, my father, a traditional local *hajji*, asked one of his friends, a former tailor from a high-ranking religious family, to bring me some of his rare religious books from the private library of his family. On yet another occasion a shopkeeper friend of my father brought me several copies of a well-known interpretation of the Qur'ān (*Tafsir-e-Nemoneh* by Makarem-e shirazi). This book was also recommended to me as an introductory text to interpretation of the Qur'ān by one of the newly graduated preachers of the Islamic school of Maktab-e ekhās (School of purity) in Shiraz.

In general, those who tried to assist me emphasised the import-

[2]Mernissi (1991a) has investigated the historical roots of dominant Muslim views towards women, and argues that they have more to do with existing patriarchal norms and roles of male elites than with Islamic theological foundations. She argues that the way women's rights have been interpreted through the *ḥadīth* has cultural and not religious doctrinal roots.

ance of particular texts or interpretations given by certain Islamic experts. Although I did not use these books and informants directly, their resources improved my theological and normative understanding of Islam.

In contrast to my male informants, who explicitly undermined the religious activity of women as less scientific and important, and as being superstitious, my female religious companions went beyond the textual and guided me with local names and addresses of female preachers whom they knew well or had heard of. They also informed me of forthcoming religious meetings held in private homes or at the city mosque, and brought me books of blessing verses and religious poetry. To them the religious meetings formed an important part of their Islamic beliefs, equally important as the religious activity of the men.

TWO

FEMALE RELIGIOUS MEETING: *ROWŻEH-E ZANĀNEH*

Introduction

In this chapter I will focus on *rowżeh* and *jaleseh*[3] (hereafter referred to simply as *rowżeh*), the religious meetings of women, and their interrelated activities. I will refer specifically to the following points: (1) the networks of religious organisation; (2) the symbolic nature of Islamic rituals; (3) the Islamic ideas and its content, and the transmission of Islamic knowledge.

The female religious meetings (*rowżeh*), in its various manifestations, is carried out in the space of a 'home'. It constitutes a woman's social and religious network. The mosque is for women only of a secondary importance, and does not constitute the only, or highest, area for collective religious authority. Women are not excluded from participating in mosques, and some organisational responsibility has recently been given to younger women. However, they do not perform the main rituals,[4] nor do they give any speeches.

The average female preachers and female ritual experts maintain significant Islamic authoritative positions at the female religious meetings staged in private homes. This latter position is in strong contrast to women's position in the mosque. Thus, to understand the religious meeting of women (*rowżeh*), one must

[3]These two terms are used interchangeably to refer to any religious meeting, although used with a slightly different form according to the time and occasion. The term *rowżeh* often refers to meeting during the holy months of Ramzăun and Muharam, while *jaleseh* refers to most Qur'ānic meetings throughout the year.

[4]After my fieldwork, I heard that once a week there was a religious meeting for women in charge of a female preacher in the Mosque of Jāmeh in Shiraz. On this day the mosque was closed to men.

consider it within an Islamic context of personal, communal and family rituals, that mainly focus on women and their religious organisational networks.

The Islamic knowledge of women is gender- and sphere-specific. The religious activity of women has been defined not only as an act of worship but as a complex of social events (Jamzadeh and Mills 1986; Betteridge 1980). The meetings are exclusively organised and headed by women and forbidden to men.[5] They also have a network of their own, thus endowing the home meetings with a mosque-like impression. The home religious meetings of women allow for a certain degree of material and spiritual exchange, through which they can adjust their position in relation to gender boundaries and family formations.

However, in my view these religious meetings also mediate everyday social and political events. The female religious meetings performed at 'home', include the arrangement of regular family religious rituals, Islamic teachings, recitings of the Qur'ān and other holy Shi'ī texts, speeches, and exegesis of the Qur'ān (*tafsīr*). The frequency of these religious meetings has increased since the Iranian revolution. The number of female participants has increased on special occasions, such as the daily *namāz* during the Ramaẓān (the month of fasting), the *'aid-e-fetr* (last day of Ramaẓān), and during visits by prominent male and female preachers from one of the holy cities.

The structure and organisation of women's religious meetings

The women's religious meeting, such as *rowżeh* and *jaleseh*, contain a series of complex rituals. The meetings are often arranged by women, mostly in private homes or in some public building, such as a religious school or a religiously endowed house (*husyneh*).

Rowżeh is a meritful and votive act of women. It may be arranged in the house of an individual family, or in a religiously endowed building. It is a particularly popular way of meeting one's religious obligations, of demonstrating one's faith, and of

[5]In the newly established religious schools, students (*talabe*) study together, or they may sit on separate benches and have different social spaces. There are three female schools in Shiraz. Maktab-e zahra and Maktab-e zainab are in charge of a female preacher; and one, Maktab-e ekhlas, is in charge of a male clergy. All three were considered to be communal properties (*byat-al-amval*).

obtaining blessings (*barakat*) for the entire family. Attendance is based on neighbourhood relations, family membership, acquaintance and friendship. These relationships form the basis of an individual's religious network.

The news of a *rowżeh* meeting is often spread by word of mouth to neighbours, relatives and friends. When women meet at a Qur'ānic meeting, they may invite each other to their own meetings, or to a common friend's meeting, or exchange information about other local rituals. This is part of their general exchange of information. Moreover, at the end of each meeting, the preacher will inform the audience about other meetings, and the particular preacher to be in charge.[6]

The organisation of female religious ritual such as *rowżeh* is a contribution towards the religious community, family unity, and a reflection of personal belief. Its performance is influenced by the broader political discourse. For example, the illness of the Imām Khomeini initiated some votive meetings in local places.

The *rowżeh* are not the only religious meetings arranged by women in order to fulfil specific vows. There are various forms of rituals, such as *khatmeh-anām* (reading the entire Chapter 6 of Qur'ān), ritual of gathering of *aḥyā* (night-watching), reciting the blessing verse of *Joshan-e kabir* (in *Mafātieh*), and Qur'ānic courses (*jales-e ghar'āt*). These religious meetings differ in the form of the rituals, and in the motives underlying the participation in the rituals. They are practised by women of various social and class backgrounds, and they may be arranged as independent ritual events, or sub-rituals, of organised religious meetings.

During the Ramaẓān of 1989, seven religious meetings (*rowżeh*) were held in my neighbourhood, each supervised by different preachers and seminary teachers. By the time of my second field trip in 1994, the number of meetings had increased in size, frequency, and number of young preachers.

In 1989 the number of participants would vary from meeting to meeting, depending on the house, the day it was held, and the form of the ritual. The attendance at a *rowżeh* during the month of Ramaẓān varied from 20 to 100. The largest meetings

[6]This is partly similar to the way in which the male preacher may inform his audience about a newly invited speaker, the location for the next gathering, and the address of a local arrangement. However, male and female communal gatherings may publicly advertise by putting an announcement at the entrance of the mosque.