In the last few years, there has been a plethora of arguments maintaining that by combining Islamic behaviour with the quest for self-determination, Muslim women are attaining a more ‘culturally authentic’ path towards a self-determination that rejects westernization and the homogenizing processes inherent in globalization.

In the context of migration, ‘multicultural’ perspectives reinforce this kind of understanding by perceiving Muslims as embodying an essence, claiming respect for a set of static and immutable traditions that would automatically and uniformly reproduce in continuity with supposedly past practices and beliefs. Although disguised by the narrative of respect for cultural difference, these representations reduce the history of the present to the nature of an inalien essence (Al-Azmeh, 1996 [1993]: 62).

This article draws upon extended research conducted between 1996 and 1998 among Muslim women, predominantly of Moroccan origin, residing in the Emilia Romagna region in the north of Italy. One of the aims of the larger research project was to show how, far from being a shared identity, being Muslim implies a battlefield for contesting how, far from being a shared identity, being Muslim can origin, residing in the Emilia Romagna region in the north of Italy. One of the aims of the larger research project was to show how, far from being a shared identity, being Muslim implies a battlefield for contesting an essence, claiming respect for a set of static and immutable traditions that would automatically and uniformly reproduce in continuity with supposedly past practices and beliefs. Although disguised by the narrative of respect for cultural difference, these representations reduce the history of the present to the nature of an inalien essence (Al-Azmeh, 1996 [1993]: 62).

Muslims and Islamists

For some Moroccan women, and indeed also for some Italian or other Arab Muslim women, Islam is the most crucial aspect of their identity. These women are usually young and well educated, wear a hijab, regularly meet in the mosque to study, and endorse what could be defined generically as an Islamist discourse. These women could be defined as ‘Islamist’. They interpret their involvement in Islamic and modernity. But knowledge can only be Islamic. As one woman stated: ‘The atmosphere in our families is not really and completely Islamic. Instead of taking a break in our days from our duties to read and study the Qur’an, we are always watching television, handling the remote control. If we continue behaving in such a way, we will remain ignorant, at a low level. We won’t learn anything.’

Confronting Modernities

Muslim Women in Italy

Although Islamic practices are shaped by the new local space they inhabit, Islamist women claim that their life in a new country where Muslims represent a minority did not play a role in their rediscovery or reinforce-ment of an Islamic identity. They perceive themselves as part of the umma, an imagin- ied transnational community that still exists all over the world, and often insist on defining Islam as a universal religion, with no local variations. Other women who are not involved with activities in the mosque, who usually do not wear a hijab, and only sporadically practise some or all of the pillars of Islam, being Muslim in Italy either remains or be-comes a generic sign of belonging. They might define themselves first as Moroccans or Arabians, and then as Muslims, although their reflections and thoughts about them- selves and others often revolve around Islam since in their day to day life in Italy, Islam is the primary frame through which their identities are filtered. These women are nonetheless Muslim, as they consider themselves spiritually, culturally and social-ly as such. This is important since it is a first way to stress that, although they negotiate religion in various ways vis-à-vis the Italian society, these women are neither hybrid, as they are sometimes defined in other con-texts (cf. Khan, 1998), nor westernized. The term hybridity, used to describe these secu- lar attitudes, is misleading for it assumes Is- lamism is historically and naturally ‘authen- tic’, denying its political and profoundly modern nature, whereas women who adopt secular stances are described as deviating from the ‘norm’.

Confronting modernities ‘Tradition’ and Islam are often erroneously seen as overlapping. By attributing different meanings to Islam, women display and artic-ulate different narratives of modernity. For Is- lamist women, modernity is possible only through knowledge and devout practice of Islam, which is nonetheless presented as a break with past traditions. This new Islam represents their way to progress and to so- cial, cultural and spiritual self-fulfilment. Other women, on the contrary, are engaged with modernity as a fracture, a process of on- going crisis between past certainties and cur- rent challenges, between the refusal of as- similation and the impetus for secularization, and they express this tension through a con- stant negotiation of and reflection upon di- verse cultural models and practices.

Women who embrace Islam in Italy do so in an attempt to distinguish themselves from Western society, asserting a project of

Continued on page 32
There are hardly any sources available for the historically most important period of Islam, i.e., the first 150 years of existence. We only have at our disposal traditions that can be found in later written collections. The historical reliability of these traditions is doubtfully because religious and political developments possibly - sometimes even demonstrably - have distorted, embellished or even created such traditions.

Four main types of dating methods are applied by Western scholars of early Islam to ascertain the historical reliability of traditions, namely: those based on the texts mutānāt of a tradition; texts based on the collections in which the traditions can be found; those that use the chains of transmitters asārid; and those that take stock of texts as well as the chains of transmitters.

Dating based on the texts of traditions have dominated historiography ever since Ignaz Goldziher’s Muhaddisänische Studien. Several criteria are applied, such as the plausibility of the text, level of development, in-ternal coherence of the textual elements, style and vocabulary. The result tends to be a relative, sometimes absolute chronology of the texts. However, research into the plausibility of the premises and the conclusions that are applied make it clear that results are often unconvincing and that there is no real footing in the texts for the purposes of absolute dating. This is a general problem with the methods that try to date traditions solely on the basis of the texts. The method seems to be less applicable when combined with other dating criteria.

Dating based on the collections of traditions received a significant impulse by Joseph Schacht, who applied this method in his book The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence. This method is important in this method - a dangerous one given that it provides little certainty because of the few available sources on early Islam.

Methods of Dating Muslim Traditions

DATING BASED ON THE TEXTS

Methods of Dating

Inaugural Lecture

Harald Motzki

Methods of Dating Muslim Traditions

The Aga Khan University, established in Karachi, Pakistan in 1983 as the country’s first private international university, comprises a Faculty of Health Sciences consisting of a Medical College and a School of Nursing, a University Hospital and an Institute for Educational Development. The University is offering programmes in Advanced Nursing in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda and planning has commenced for a College of Arts and Sciences in Karachi.

The Institute of Islamic Civilisations, a unit of the University, is being established in London, UK. Its goal is to further the study of Muslim civilisations, through research and instruction on the heritage, in all its historical diversity, in moral and ethical thought, forms of governance and public life, and in art and creative expression in all its forms. The Institute will seek to create contexts for intercultural and religious practices. In certain cases, the endorsement of a Muslim agenda and the process of studying and learning become a terrain whereby women negotiate their aspirations for autonomy and self-realisation in a sort of public sphere without challenging their husbands’ traditional supremacy in the private sphere. Women who actively engage in Islam are not necessarily less embedded within dominant discourses, articulated as the ‘Western’ and the ‘Islamist’, both of which they feel are ultimately alien to their identities. Indeed, several amongst the Muslim women I have worked with define themselves as Muslims but refuse Islamism as the only political and cultural frame leading to self-determination without assimilation. For them, there is a strong need for religious norms, but is rather about positioning themselves through genuinely recognising negotiations of inescapable outcomes of living in a different society.

Vacancy: The Aga Khan University

Institute of Islamic Civilisations

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Methods of Dating

The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence

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