

Gender at the Crossroads

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A 'Women's Space' at the Indian Ocean Crossroads: Women's Mosques in the Maldives

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Introduction

The Maldives is a country comprised of over one thousand low-lying coral islands in the Indian Ocean that are grouped—both geographically and administratively—in atolls. Through a regional history of involvement in international trade the Maldives was once a crossroads region between the Middle East and Asia. With maritime trade came the spread of Islam, and today the population of the Maldives is reportedly one hundred percent Sunni Muslim. While many common Islamic practices in the region are clearly directly informed by historical Maldivian trading connections, as well as contemporary global movements, some of the practices associated with Islam in this region seem to differ from those found in neighboring countries. One of the most striking of these is the Maldivian practice of maintaining women's mosques, called *nisha miski*. Maldivian women's mosques are separate buildings, run by *mudahim*—the female equivalent of a *mudimu*, or mosque caretaker—women who lead the prayers and act as caretakers for the buildings.

Women's mosques are not found in all parts of the Maldives, and those visiting the capital island, Male', may not have the opportunity to see such buildings. This is because the mosques in Male', including the

prominent national mosque, have separate balcony areas or curtained sections for women within the larger mosque area. In spite of the lack of women's mosques in Male', women's mosques are a widespread practice in the rest of the Maldives. On most of the outlying islands women have their own mosque or mosques, and there are an estimated 250 women's mosques on the nation's 200 inhabited islands. Maldivian women's mosques, like the men's mosques, are government institutions.

In this paper I will address the role that multiple social/cultural worlds play in constituting Maldivian women's mosques as a gendered religious site and examine the ways in which practices associated with the mosques challenge common notions of Muslim women's roles as dependent upon a strict dichotomy between public and private spaces. Using ethnographic and archival material I will conceptualize Maldivian ways of interacting with women's mosques as significant spatial practices that are shaped by Maldivian linkages to local, national, and global communities. In doing so, I hope to offer a perspective on gendered practices in Islam that necessitates critical examination of the ways in which Islamic institutions are situated within multiple socio-cultural spheres.

Common Discourses about Muslim Women's Mosques and Other Institutional Spaces

The role of Muslim women in public life has recently been at the center of global discussions about Islam and its social role in Muslim communities. Women's activities in mosque spaces are frequent topics of this discussion—for example, in March 2005 Professor Amina Wadud of Virginia Commonwealth University (USA) sparked international controversy by leading a mixed gender congregation in an Islamic prayer service. Headlines from news sources around the world called this a revolution in gender relations within Islam, debating the propriety of Wadud's actions within the framework of both Muslim social norms and Islamic religious law. This prayer meeting, and specifically the role gendered leadership of prayer, is a part of larger current media dialogues about the role of a "moderate" Islam in world Muslim communities and the social status of women in Muslim communities. Yet, in spite of this general interest in the role of women in Islamic prayer congregations, few media sources note the diversity of religious institutions in the public sphere in which many Muslim women participate, including institutions such as religious schools, prayer gatherings, and pilgrimage sites.

Even rarer are mentions of women's mosques at places of prayer primarily for women. Media attention to such sites has been so scarce that most newspapers and news websites that have taken notice of such sites frequently make the extreme claim that the women's mosque in question is the only one in the world. For example, one article that discusses a South Indian community's work to establish a women's mosque is titled "Getting Ready for World's First Women's-Only Mosque", and the author claims that "the first women's *jamaat* in the world may well lead to the first women's mosque in history" (Anand, 2004:1). In an article on women's mosques in China a reporter for the Sydney Morning Herald, claims that these are, "unique in the Islamic world" (2005:1), a sentiment obviously shared by the BBC reporter writing a news piece on the

same women's mosques, who states that, "this is socialist Islam with Chinese characteristics" (Lim, 2004:1). Similar claims about mosques emerging in places such as Amsterdam, Kabul, Hong Kong and Somalia appear in the media as well.

There are a number of scholarly works on the subject of women's mosques in different parts of the world, and authors have investigated the phenomenon of women's mosques in countries such as China (Jaschok and Jingjun 2000) and Somalia (Samatar 2005) with great interest. In one of the most thorough studies of women's mosques in China, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam* (2000), Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun outline women's religious practices in Hui communities. Here we see that Hui Muslims have had separate mosques for women, and female leadership within those mosques, for hundreds of years—possibly back to the 12th century. The authors' explanation for the existence of women's mosques in China, embraced by most scholarly reviewers, is that these mosques are atypical Muslim institutions made possible by the geographic isolation of Hui Chinese Muslim community.

The disjuncture between representations of these sites of women's experiences as atypical institutions, and the information found in scholarly studies about the role of women in diverse Islamic institutions and public spaces can only be explained when we consider that most of the studies have conceptualized these sites as locally relevant, constituted in local cultural spheres, and associated with isolated local Muslim communities. The issue is a disjuncture is between discourses about cultural spheres—e.g. "local" vs. "global" Islam—rather than being merely a lack of general knowledge in the general public media.

Constituting a Site of Spatial Practices

Given the widespread nature of movements for women's mosques—as well as global examples of many different spaces in which women express their roles in Islamic rituals, perform their beliefs in community spaces, and play a role in Muslim community life—it is reasonable to consider Muslim

women's public institutions within larger cultural arenas. We can begin to inform global discourses about Islam through an examination of cross-cultural connections between the ways in which spaces such as women's mosques, as well as other gendered Islamic institutions, shape the practices of "being Muslim". While cross-cultural studies of such phenomena are therefore called for, there are also other ways for social scientists to engage with the topic of women's mosques fruitfully for the purpose of a broader understanding. As in this case study in the Maldives, ethnographic studies of one particular cultural setting can illustrate interconnections between multiple cultural spheres. The Maldives case study provides us with a site of both geographic and cultural crossroads, where women's mosques are simultaneously constituted at multiple social levels, thus intertwining local, national, and global interests.

The metaphor of the crossroads is used here to emphasize that women's mosques are sites made significant through spatial practices, which consist of "a projection onto a (spatial) field of all aspects, elements, and moments of social practice" (Lefebvre 1991:8), thereby creating spaces that embody socio-cultural concepts. These are ideologies mapped onto physical landscapes and particular places that in turn shape the lived experiences of the people who occupy these spaces.

Perhaps the most commonly invoked spatial practice associated with gender issues in Islam is the public/private (or inside/outside) divide. As a spatial practice this dichotomy is often considered to be a primary social distinction that many social scientists assume to be a fundamental, cross-cultural element of Muslim social life, particularly in the social lives of Muslim women. For example, author Katherine Ewing, in the article "Crossing Borders and Transgressing Boundaries" has argued that,

Gender in Muslim societies, for instance, is spatially organized and bounded... creating a sharp differentiation between "inside" and "outside," located within a broader terrain of a borderless, potentially global community (*umma*). Muslim conceptualizations of boundaries and nationalist conceptualizations of borders thus create different sorts of social

spaces and organize identity differently (Ewing 1998:263).

Here Ewing implies that the inside/outside spatial practice supersedes that of national/cultural territories, hence is a spatial practice associated with Islam that takes precedence over other spatial practices in the concerned people's lives. While the public-private distinction is indeed significant in a number of ethnographic cases, it has become a reified category—a label for spatial practices that has come to over-emphasize notions about gender divides in Muslim communities and obscure our understanding of actual practices.

When we examine culturally specific notions of this "public/private" divide, the actual spatial practices and accompanying systems of social meaning that are mapped onto local geographies can vary significantly. For example, in the book *Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women and the Politics of Agency in Postcolonial Niger*, author Ousseina Alidou notes that in Niger common notions of a gendered public-private divide are shaped in as much by class as by gender, creating distinctions between beggar women and housewives (Alidou, 2005:14-15). Alidou also points to numerous other ways of thinking about the spatial dichotomies within the Muslim communities that can help us to gain a more detailed understanding of the diverse communities commonly homogenized through the label of the "Muslim world". For example she alludes to the significance of regional spaces in constituting Muslims through discourses about cultural divisions between what is "Arabic" and what is "African", as well as Arab nationalist sentiments in relation to notions of a global *umma* (Alidou, 2005:5-6).

The idea that being Muslim is constructed through spatial practices in different cultural communities in a variety of ways is supported by a variety of anthropological works on Islamic practices. In Mary Elaine Hegland's work, while the central spatial paradigm for Muharram rituals in Pakistan remains the historical battle on the Karbala plains, Pakistani women's participation in these rituals is oriented and reconfigured in relationship to local spatial practices (Hegland 1998:251). Saba Mahmood's book on women's

mosque movements in Egypt, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, similarly links the women's movement to the political landscape of Egypt and social terrain of the women's lives (2005).

At times even in seemingly universalist movements in Islam we see the utilization of fundamentally locally situated concepts of Islam. For example in the article "Does French Islam Have Borders?", John Bowen describes a movement for a "French Islam" that is opposed by what is considered to be "universalist" ideas of Islam (Bowen, 2004). He notes, however, that visiting scholars resistant to French Islam scholars, are those who,

...[c]ome to France for these sessions, and then return to their posts in Syria, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia... precisely because these guest speakers do work in the Arab-Muslim environments of the Middle East, they have little patience with the call for "new interpretations" of Islam to fit French conditions (Bowen, 2004: 51).

Here we see that what may initially seem like tension between a locally specific concept of Islam and more universal one is actually part of multiple local perspectives on historically formed tensions within international networks of knowledge and power. As Bowen himself writes, it is "precisely because" of the social and cultural backgrounds of these scholars that they reject calls for a specifically French Islam. At first glance Bowen may seem to be suggesting that whether we are engaged in the spatial practice of mapping Islam to national geographies or resisting political boundaries, the spatial practices of "being Muslim" are fundamentally local. However, as we can see in the Maldives case study, the situation is far more complex—the local, national, and global are intersecting systems of meaning, systems that meet at particular crossroad sites such as women's mosques.

Maldivian National Spatial Practices

While there is little mention of women's mosques in the historical records of the Maldives, the 14th century travelogue of Ibn Battuta documents that the ruler at the time of his visit

to the area was a woman, Sultana Khadija, who was responsible for appointing mosque officials and judges of Islamic law (Dunn, 2005:231). Thus we know that historically women had a national role in shaping Maldivian Islamic institutions; this may have some bearing on the tradition of women's mosques in the area.

The spatial practices of women's mosques in the Maldives today are more clearly linked to Maldivian national politics¹. In the Maldives the central government, through the Supreme Islamic Council, impacts every aspect of religious life. The text of the 1997 constitution of the Maldives stipulates that Islam is the official state religion, and that the Maldivian President must be Sunni, as he holds the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam" (Larkin, 2001:511). Associated laws of religious unity make it the duty of both the Government of the Maldives and the people to ensure religious unity. One particular outcome of these laws is that it is illegal in the Maldives for religious gatherings to take place outside of government sponsored mosques—government mosques are used to ensure religious unity within national borders. Women's mosques are therefore constituted by the national government, as they are built as government institutions and the *mudahim* of women's mosques are appointed and paid by the central government.

According to government publications, women's mosques in the Maldives were initially associated with the government's social initiative to provide public spaces for women to, as one government official of the Maldives told me, "get women outside of the home". The mosques have been linked to Women's Committees on the islands, which were formed by the 1979 National Women's Committee. Government publications of the time period report that the women's committees were responsible for cleaning, construction,

¹ Readers should note that the information on political life in the Maldives refers to the time period before the elections in fall 2008. The recent 2008 constitution of the Maldives is substantially different from the 1997 version, and the contents of this article do not reflect these new developments in Maldivian political life.

and maintenance of mosques to train women in civic roles (Department of Information and Broadcasting, 1985:7; Office for Women's Affairs, 1989:21).

While spatial practices associated with "being Muslim" in the Maldives are then literally formed by the central government, including the mapping of gendered spaces for prayer, they are also informed by Maldivian concepts of islands as social units. Maldivian women's mosques are oriented in relation to the notion of an island, or local community. In the Maldives the island is a central spatial metaphor for social life, and conversations about social practices are often conceptually mapped to contrast life on Male' (including the capital island and its immediate neighbors) versus that on the "islands", i.e. outlying islands. When asked about Muslim spatial practices such as the construction of women's mosques, for example, most residents of Male' are careful to name this as an island practice, belonging to those spaces.

The government of the Maldives clearly uses mosque spaces as a tool in government programs geared towards shaping ideal island communities. To alleviate over-population problems on Male' Island, for example, the Maldivian government recently built a man-made island nearby, and has worked to attract residents through the construction of a number of facilities, including a large and ornate mosque. Mosque attendance is used to calculate whether the population of an island is sufficient, and several Maldivians report that if fewer than fifty adults attend the mosque on an island then residents of that island may face relocation to another sparsely populated island.

The notion of an island as a specific zone of social practices is part of a larger cultural geography that contrasts social life in Male', the 200 inhabited islands, and the 80 resort islands that have been developed for international tourism. These spatial relations are enforced by, and perhaps even inform, governmental regulations in the Maldives. For example, while it is illegal in all other areas of the Maldives to engage in practices that are circumscribed as not "being Muslim", these laws are suspended for resort islands, with the general rationale that

they are spaces for foreigners (including both guest workers and guest tourists), rather than Maldivians. Thus resort islands are allowed to serve alcohol and pork, practices that are illegal in other physical locations. The national community of the Maldives is carved up into separate zones of social practice as distinctly as the resort islands themselves, terraformed for optimal beach use, have been physically shaped for those practices.

Maldivian Local Spatial Practices

Island spaces, while defined in the national arena, are not wholly constituted within national ideologies. Local communities also play a role in defining island social practices, particularly the women's mosque of the island. Maldivian islands are spaces where usage of areas can be defined by cultural beliefs about the movements of dangerous magical spirits, which Islamic practices and sites are believed to help to control (see for example Raze, 2006: 115-117). Islands are also social units where women are part of insular social hierarchies that order daily life. This became most evident while travelling in the northern atolls of the Maldives, when I had the opportunity to interview a number of *mudahim* on different islands. I found during this time that while some *mudahim* consider themselves to occupy their position by virtue of their government appointment alone, other *mudahim*, particularly older women, articulate their role as that of the social leader of women on their island, locating the significance of their practices in women's mosque sites within the social order of the island locale.

On one island, for example, a *mudahim* indicated that she was "the leader of women on the island" before gaining any government positions, citing both her role as *mudahim* and president of the island Women's Committee as outcomes of this initial role. Furthermore, she explained that she held this position because her mother, who died about 30 years ago, had been the leader of women on their island before her. Another older *mudahim* echoed these ideas, with similar claims of her mother having been a leader among women on the island. She explained that she had inherited both the leader

of women and *mudahim* position from her mother. This 63 year-old woman also reported that she remembered the women's mosque as having been a part of the community from her earliest childhood days, suggesting that the government reports linking the development of women's mosque to women's committees about 27 years ago may not tell us the whole story about the origins of these sites. The legacy of leadership these women inherited from their mothers suggests that participation in these institutions may be related to Maldivian cultural practices of passing down of particular types of work from mother to daughter, such as that of midwife or teacher. These may also be more generally linked to other kinship based social patterns, such as the Maldivian matrilineal residence patterns through which named houses have traditionally been passed from mothers to daughters.

In addition, while the women's mosques have been built as government institutions, observed patterns in mosque design and upkeep in the different islands suggests that these spaces derive a great deal of their social significance from local community participation. Within one atoll group it is possible to find a wide variety of mosque conditions, with some women's mosques in need of basic repairs and other mosques in excellent condition, finished with expensive new materials. In conversation the women linked the upkeep of their mosques to the economic opportunities available to members of their community, discussing private incomes rather than government funding as a source of funds. On many islands mosques are also sponsored by individual community members, and women report that being a mosque patron is a sign of high social status for local community members. Thus the actual possibilities for religious and social interactions within the women's mosques, the deciding mechanism for whether a women's mosque is a place for comfortable reading, study, and prayer, depends as much on local island social life as government intervention.

Global Spatial Practices in the Maldives
The role of global social relations in

constituting women's mosques in the Maldives as spatial practices is perhaps the most fundamental, as Islam was one of many new ideas that came to the Maldives as part of the aforementioned historical trade interactions. The Maldives' geographic location in the Indian Ocean historically made the area an ideal stopping place for voyagers traveling between different diverse ports in the Middle East, South Asia, the eastern coasts of Africa, and Southeast Asia. With these diverse cultural influences came Islam, and in 1153 the Maldivian ruler converted to Islam and established an Islamic sultanate that continued until 1968.

Historical global trade networks provided ample opportunity for the spread of new ideas, and Indian Ocean trade may also have empowered Maldivian women socio-economically. The shallow atoll waters surrounding the Maldives islands were navigational obstacles that required the participation of skilled local sailors and boat builders/repairers, and Maldivian men played a role in historical trade in these positions. Maldivian women were responsible for two of the main products of the Maldives, as women made coconut fiber rope and collected cowry shells. While Maldivian products such as coconut fiber rope and dried fish were products that may have only traveled to nearby ports, cowry shells from the region circulated in world markets as currency as early as the mid-9th century, and until the late 19th to early 20th centuries. The existence of a possible tradition of women's mosques in Yemen, as well as the historical movement of Yemeni trader through the Indian Ocean routes (see Ho 2006), suggests potential additional ties between Maldivian women's mosque and these historical trade networks as well.

Women's Mosques at the Crossroads

Each of these arenas of meaning (the national, local, and global) offers only a partial understanding of the socio-cultural contexts within which women's mosques exist as sites of spatial practice in the Maldives. For example, while the national government links women's mosques to the creation of women's committees, the National Women's Committee was formed

in preparation for the 1985 International Women's Conference in Nairobi (Office for Women's Affairs, 1989:21). Women link their roles in both of these bodies, the mosques and committees, to local social roles. Thus national concepts of women's civic roles can only be understood in relation to both international and local discourses/movements.

Ideas about Islam in the Maldives are similarly embedded in multiple systems of meaning. While President Gayoom has been a key national influence in upholding the primary tenets of Islam, the president had received a degree in Islamic theology from Al-Ahzar University in Egypt. Several authors have written about the ideological influences of this religious background, and some Maldivians claim that the connections that Gayoom made at Al-Ahzar have led to the establishment of a number of internationally backed Islamic institutions in the Maldives, including *madrasas* (religious schools) built with Saudi-based financing. Many other figures that have shaped Islamic law in the Maldives have similar educational backgrounds that are informed by global influences, since,

...many judges in the Maldives receive their training at traditional schools in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in particular Al-Azhar and Medina University, respectively. The Chief Justice of the Maldives, who also serves as Chairman of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, is Mohamed Rasheed Ibrahim, whose legal education is primarily from Egypt and Saudi Arabia where he spent a total of 17 years. Other judges have received training in Western countries, Pakistan, and Malaysia (Robinson et al, 2006:7).

Considering that women's mosques do not appear in other countries with similar global religious influences, intertwining of diverse local, national, and international interests can explain the Maldivian practice of Islam that has shaped women's mosques as religious sites.

The Maldivian government restriction on group prayers outside of government mosques is said to be related to national concerns about Islamic movements in nearby areas of South and Central Asia, thus both national and global

forces interact to limit the types of sites possible for Islamic practices in the Maldives. Similarly, local notions about social status and mosque patronage are upheld through individual access to jobs in international resorts, intertwining local status and international economies to produce possibilities for women's mosques in the Maldives. The interconnections between these three different bodies of information indicate that women's mosques are constituted as sites that embody the spatial practices at multiple levels of meaning.

Understanding Maldivian women's mosque as sites of a crossroads of spatial practices can also help explain the popular concept of a "first-ever" woman's mosque in all of the places mentioned earlier in this piece. The maintenance and construction of these women's mosques are conceived of as specific to particular socio-cultural settings. The disjuncture between these claims and our knowledge of their existence in other parts of the world lies not simply in misinformation, but rather in the gap between women's mosques as spatial practices in local/national arenas, and their as of yet lack of position in transnational community conceptualizations. Women's mosques have not yet been fully constituted as spatial practices in concepts of a transnational or global Muslim community.

Since gender issues in Islam are commonly and increasingly discussed in popular media in terms of transnational settings, however, it is appropriate for academics to ask why women's mosques are not constituted as spatial practices in this sphere. As advocates of knowledge we can introduce the concept of women's mosques in discussions that claim to represent the spectrum of Muslim experience, prompting recognition of how these sites are a part of the process of ascribing meaning to global Islamic institutions and associated spatial practices. Finally, we can evaluate what women's mosques might mean when introduced to discourse about large scale, non-local, communities of Muslims, such as the global *ummah*, when we further investigate their roles as crossroad sites for local, national, and global spatial practices.

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