

2nd TRANSNATIONAL WORKSHOP REPORT

Reconciliation Through art: Perceptions of Hijab

Sofia, 18 April 2008

The Workshop

The 2nd transnational workshop of the project ‘Reconciliation Through art: Perceptions of Hijab’ took place in Sofia, on the 18th April 2008. Its purpose was to discuss different aspects of the hijab in greater depth thus expanding the understanding of the project subject among partners, associate partners and facilitators. In the context of the project’s lifecycle, the workshop marked the end of the first phase i.e. the preparatory and research stage, and the beginning of the second i.e. the creative workshops.

The workshop was organised by Kiril Topalov, from Academy of Balkan Civilisation, at the University of St Clemens of Ohrid. It was publicized in advance through posters and personal contacts throughout the University as well as to other scientists, researchers and students interested in the subject. 16 people took part and approximately another 10 students attended as audience. Representatives of all but one partner organisations were present along with the workshop facilitators from the three participating countries.

The workshop was composed mainly of papers presented by academics and students of Arabic studies who presented either in English or Bulgarian. The presentations were followed by a discussion amongst participants. An interpreter was present to translate into English.

As remarked by participants at the end of the workshop, the variety and profundity of the papers was impressive and made a very useful contribution to the understanding of the project topic. Some of the information provided focused on Bulgaria but were very valuable nevertheless in appreciating the particularities present in the participating country with regards to its Muslim population and diversity of issues related to the topic. The workshop was followed by comments and thoughts by participants who praised the organizers and speakers for this excellent workshop. Overall the workshop was inspirational for all those involved and therefore a very positive introduction to the steering committee meeting that followed.

This report provides a summary of the presentations given by the invited speakers.

Summaries of presentations

1. Hijab and the Iranian women – by Dr Ludmila Yaneva

Dr Yaneva gave a historical account of the veiling practice in Iran since the 19th century till the present day, demonstrating the significance of the hijab in the women's rights movement and its role in the national politics throughout that period.

The struggle for the emancipation of women on Iran reportedly started in the 19th century. In her paper Dr. Yaneva explained the long standing conflict between the reformists and traditionalists in Iran since the 19th century and past the Iranian revolution and described how both sides wronged women's rights. On one hand were the reformists such as Reza Shah who banned veiling, stripped women of their tradition and honor and on the other the traditionalists who enforced the veiling reduced women's freedom. The issue was clearly political: tradition against what was seen as affiliation with the West. Currently, despite a "fashion police" controlling the observance of hijab, the president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad finds the controversies over the hijab insignificant compared to the issues such as economy, restoration of peace, creation of a secure psychological environment, and support the public. According to Dr Yaneva today's Iranian women might be veiled but they have found their own way of progressing past all the limitations, especially through writing and the veil has become one of the favorite themes in women's post-revolutionary literature both for which there are supporters and opposers. Today, she concludes most women in Iran are of the opinion that the veil and the scarf are not their Hijab (restriction); they believe that the laws and denying them their rights are their real Hijab.

2. How to understand Hijab: an attempt for identifying the sociological meaning of the unveiling - by Dr Iashar Abdulselamoglu

Dr Iashar Abdulselamoglu gave a presentation regarding the issue of modernisation and Islam.

The history of modernisation of Islamic societies and the attitudes of Islam against the west can be seen as a struggle between two cultural models in which the liberalisation of women is a key factor. Dr Abdulselamoglu explained that if the Islamic world interprets modernisation as westernisation, this triggers a reaction among Muslims against modernity. Islamic fundamentalism opposes liberalisation which it equals to secularisation. He spoke extensively about the Islamic cultural model of a patriarchal society where the freedom of women means distraction from its core values. Thus the veil is a way to sustaining the morality of traditional society where women become the pillars of tradition and maintain the dominance of men. From another point of view, women in a modern world in order for women to integrate in social life, they ignore their own femininity. Dr Abdulselamoglu gave the example of the judicial standing of a woman that contributed to the division between Islamic and modern regimes. The politicisation of Islam has put forward the role of woman. In this dispute the veil has been associated with the revival of pre-modern Islamic tradition and opposition to western

society in which the woman goes back to her “traditional status”. The image of traditional Muslim woman in our consciousness is a passive, fatalistic, obedient and faithful beings; but currently this notion is being overturned with women taking part in the political struggle and turn into active and fighting human beings. Currently elements of traditional morality are turning into instruments of freedom. In this struggle the hijab allows the involvement of women in the public sphere.

3. *The Mohammedan Bulgarians (Pomaks)- by Dr Stoyan Raichevsky*

Dr Raichevsky gave a historical and anthropological description of the Mohammedan Bulgarians.

Mohammedan Bulgarians have often been the subject of research in contemporary Bulgarian and Balkan historiography. As reported by Dr Raichevsky this research concludes that Mohammedan Bulgarians (*Pomaks*) adopted Islam on a mass scale mainly in the period 17th-18th c. mostly for financial reasons some by force but their Christian past can be detected in their rituals, folk holidays, lineal or family names, in toponymy and hydronymy of their settlements. Their language which has often been the centre of research resembles old Bulgarian but is also adapted to the various local –Christian- Bulgarian dialects. For similar reasons Mohammedan Bulgarians cannot be united culturally into a single ethno-cultural or ethnographic group, which tend to correspond to the characteristics of the local Christian population. Dr Raichevsky explained that research shows that Mohammedan Bulgarians define themselves ethnically as Bulgarians and religiously as Muslims. The literary term “Mohammedan Bulgarians” employed from the early 20th c. is on the same level with the names of other non-Orthodox Bulgarians like Catholic Bulgarians and Protestant Bulgarians but is only used in texts. Mohammedan Bulgarians are called differently according to the geographic regions, where their settlements are.

Over the decades several migration waves of Mohammedan Bulgarians took place, heading south to settle permanently in Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace and as a result the number of Mohammedan Bulgarians has reduced. Referring to the hijab Dr Raichevsky explained that the custom was lost during the urban migration of Pomaks and was only kept by older women in villages. What appears interesting is that in recent years some young girls decided to put on the hijab. This has caused problems at schools and universities. According to Dr Raichevsky the new interest in the hijab has arguably been instigated from religious leaders financed by Arabic countries adding to the tension already existing in the country between Christians and Muslims.

they they

4. *The Hijab affair – by Biliana Popova (student)*

Biliana Popova analyzed historically and sociologically the implications of modernisation and fundamentalism and the involvement of the hijab in this.

Through the hijab the position and role of the woman in the society has been clearly defined. But for the Europeans the hijab contradicts the most important ideals of our time- that of freedom and equality which are conditions necessary for development and progress.

Over the past century certain Islamic countries (Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia and Indonesia), in the name of modernisation -influenced by the West, prohibited the hijab. Ms Popova explained how these modernisation policies shook the foundations of society and brought enormous social changes that destabilized the people's identities. In this backdrop and influenced by political and economic crisis, since the 1970's this triggered Islamic fundamentalism, which according to the presenter is possibly the biggest obstacle to the development of these regions. In this climate, she concludes Islamic propaganda has been using women at will. In recent years the situation was further complicated when large numbers of Muslim immigrants moved to Europe, away from their countries, carrying their traditions with them. Europe, she states, has reacted by following a policy which they call "tolerant" towards the Moslem immigrants in their countries, the problem is that underneath lies total incomprehension of the Muslim world. Referring to the hijab she is of the opinion that it has become a "problem", because if some years ago the hijab was a symbol of religious difference and faith (as the true Islam promulgates), now in some countries it is a symbol of power, terror and submission (as a result of Islamism). She concluded that it is therefore absurd to believe that we can totally impose our ideas to another nation, or to accept absolutely ideas from another nation; we must understand the differences, but we must accept only these which are adequate for the concrete society.

5. The Hijab across the centuries - by Stella Bratova

Stella Bratova explored the position of the woman and practice of hijab in Arab societies over the centuries and the interpretation of hijab according to the holy texts.

Ms Bratova described how the society was reversed from matriarchal in pre-Islamic times to patriarchal by the time of Mahammed. Islam helped re-establish some rights for the women. In pre-islamic Arabia veiling was a symbol of respect and dignity and only became compulsory at least two generations after Mohammed's death. After that the hijab became a social norm despite the fact that the Koran does not stipulate veiling and promotes equality of men and women. Ms Bratova referred to various interpretations of Islamic holy texts regarding "hijab", to demonstrate how ambiguous these are. Her account carried on to recent decades when stimulated by Europe, Muslim women have started demanding their place in public life. In many places the feminist movement coincides with revolts against the colonizers. Thus, she explained in the sixties it was rare to see a woman with covered face. At the beginning of the seventies appears the phenomenon Islamism which alters fashion and Islamic identity accordingly: Men had to have beards and the veil reappears among urban population. Ms Popova concludes that there is no single meaning or interpretation of hijab. The idea of the hijab is relative: its meaning varies greatly according to the country, class and even people. To wear a hijab could signify the social, religious or ethnical belonging or simply that the woman doesn't want male attention.

6. Fashion Hijabs – by Gala Gatseva (student)

Gala Gatseva spoke about the different forms and styles of veil in different Muslim countries across the world and the different interpretations of the correct hijab

From her account it becomes obvious that the custom of veiling depends on the history, the traditions and the policy of the particular country. *Hijab, burqa, niqab, jilbab, khimar* or *shayla* are some of the words used to refer to different styles of head and body covering. Ms Gatseva referred to the different interpretations of the Qur'anic texts about how much of the male or female body should be exposed. In recent years she states there is a revival of the hijab-veil among women but also men have replaced western clothes such as jeans for more traditional outfits.

7. *Hijab –uses and misuses – by Prof. d-r Cvetana Hubenova*

Prof. Hubenova, approached the topic of hijab in Western and Muslim societies from psychoanalytical perspective, and analyzed the symbolism of the hijab.

The paper considers the notion that the hijab is a means invented by men to oppress women; it is an instrument that undermines equal opportunities and leads to the separation of the Muslim woman from men and their lower status in society but the position of women have been also misinterpreted in the Christian world. In her paper Prof. Hubenova discusses the symptoms of globalisation, immigration, modernisation and the rip this has caused to Islamic communities that have reacted by asserting their own culture. In this world., she believes the hijab has become a symbol of identity, which is threatened in a globalised world which in turn explains why it has become popular in recent years. Is hijab therefore, a positive symbol of self-expression or sign of oppression, she asks?

Prof. Hubenova brought her presentation to a close by analyzing the element of fear which underpins the conflicts between Islamic and Western cultures. Our inquiries into the knowledge and practice of other cultures, she says, offer the opportunity of not only understanding the other but also understanding ourselves better and that by understanding our own judgments and precognitions we can overcome the element of fear the lies underneath the conflict of hijab. Perhaps in looking behind our own “veil” and recognizing the complexity of our own motives and desires, she concludes we can find – not only that which remains hidden and barred – but also that which remains human and common to us all.