

Abstract

Submitting to God: Women's Islamization in Urban Malaysia. By Sylva Frisk. Doctoral dissertation 2004, Department of Social Anthropology, Göteborg University, Brogatan 4, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden. ISBN: 91-628-6132-8.

This anthropological study addresses issues of subjectivity and agency within the context of pious, Muslim, Malay women's religious practice in urban Malaysia. It investigates how Malay women come to understand themselves as gendered, religious subjects and, thereby, explores the motivations and meanings that women ascribe to their emergent roles in the religious sphere and within the Islamization process. Through an ethnographic account of women's religious activities, the dissertation shows how Malay women, in the urban context, have incorporated Islamic ideas and values in their everyday lives, placing great importance on the observance of religious duties and worship and expressing sensitivity in relation to correct religious behaviour both in private and public. Through the cultivation of the desire to submit to God's will, women develop an identity as *mukmin* - a person who lives her life in accordance to God's will, thereby practicing Islam, not so much as a religion, as a way of life. In this process, women actively reproduce, recreate and transform Islamic discourse and practice through religious practices in everyday life.

Theoretically the dissertation discusses the ideas of women's subjectivity and agency within feminist theory, particularly the tendency to understand subject formation and agency in exclusively negative terms. At the core of such a negative paradigm of subjectification is the idea that the individual emerges from constraint. The subject is understood in passive terms as an effect of discursive structures and actions, which means that the subject's agency is mainly understood as resistance to or dislocation from dominant norms. While this approach has found its usefulness for feminist theory, this study stresses that it offers only a *partial* account of agency. Through the study of the generative aspects of pious, Malay women's subjectification and agency the dissertation argues that women's active involvement in the Islamic movement in Malaysia can't be understood exclusively in terms of a capacity for action in the world and an ability to challenge and displace social norms from their own subordinate social position. Such an understanding leaves out important aspects of pious, Malay women's agency - their active cultivation of the will to submit to God's will.

Key words: Anthropology, Malaysia, Islam, Religious practice, Gender, Agency, Subjectivity.