

Contextualizing Muslim Religious-Only Marriages

This special issue focuses on Muslim religious-only marriages, which are marriages not recognized by state authorities but which at least one of the parties involved considers religiously valid. The practice of informal religious marriages has manifested in different parts of the world, and such marriages have become a topic of debate and intervention. In a tripartite dynamic, state authorities are involved in attempts to regulate or criminalize religious-only marriages, religious actors play a variety of roles, and the couples involved are left to navigate an increasingly controversial field. This special issue explores these issues in detail by investigating the interactions among state authorities, religious actors, and the couples themselves, and the motivations of each in their engagement with the others.

The contributions to this special issue were, with one exception, presented at the two-day symposium *Unregistered Muslim Marriages—Regulations and Contestations*. This symposium was organized by Rajnaara Akhtar and Annelies Moors and held in April 2017 at the De Montfort University in Leicester, in conjunction with the University of Amsterdam.¹ All of the papers are based on well-grounded empirical research. The authors employ a variety of methods, from participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews to discourse analysis of texts and images and social media use. They have worked with different interlocutors, including state actors, religious authorities of various standing and persuasions, NGOs, and ordinary Muslims involved in these marriages. Research has been conducted both in Muslim-majority settings (Malaysia, Tunisia, and Jordan) as well as in countries where Muslims are a religious minority (Norway, England, and the Netherlands), in states that have developed a diverse range of policies on Muslim religious-only marriages, and with Muslim constituencies that differ both in terms of ethnic and national backgrounds and with respect to the nature of their religious commitment.

1 At the University of Amsterdam, this research is part of the ERC-funded research project on 'Problematizing "Muslim Marriages": Ambiguities and Contestations,' grant number 2013-AdG-324180.

Taken together, the six contributions include the perspectives of a wide variety of interlocutors. Annelies Moors, Martijn de Koning, and Vanessa Vroon-Najem investigate the media hype about the further criminalization of Muslim religious-only marriages in the Netherlands, discussing the positions taken by religious authority figures in public debate, and presenting the perspectives of female converts who enter into polygamous marriages. Anja Bredal worked with policy makers and mosque administrators in Norway and discusses their position on the double-track (civil and religious) system of marriage authorization in that jurisdiction. Rehana Parveen researched the files of a Sharia Council in Birmingham and analyzes the perspectives of women of Pakistani-British background about their experiences with religious and civil marriage and divorce. Eva Nisa investigated motivations for religious-only marriages among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia as well as the points of view of Malaysian and Indonesian religious authorities on these marriages. Dina Zbeidy, who carried out research in Wihdat camp in Jordan, examines both marriages that are concluded at a very early stage in relationships among Palestinians and Muslim religious-only marriages among Syrians, contrasting the perspectives of developmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with those of people engaging in these practices. Iris Kolman undertook anthropological fieldwork in Tunis to discover why a small number of people opt for cohabitation rather than for either a religious-only marriage or a state-registered marriage. From these six case studies, four themes emerge that we briefly discuss below: the state regulation of religion and marriage, the problematization of Muslim religious-only marriages, the interventions of religious authority figures, and the perspectives of those involved in these marriages.

1 State Regulation of Religion and Marriage

The emergence of the modern nation-state has engendered particular forms of regulation of religion and marriage. The *idea* of secular governance starts from the separation of religion and state, of the private and the public, and the relegation of religion to the private sphere. However, in practice there is no such separation. Rather, secular rule is a form of governance that regulates the religious field (Asad 2003). State authorities do not only categorize some forms of religion as more acceptable and other forms as less acceptable or even beyond the pale of what may be tolerated, but also define what acts can be considered as constituting the field of religion (Brown 2006; Fernando 2014).