

Broadcasting Female Muslim Preaching in Kenya: Negotiating Religious Authority and the Ambiguous Role of the Voice¹

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Most of the Islamic public sermonising in Kenya is done by male clerics. However, since the liberalisation of the airwaves there is an emerging clique of female preachers (*dai'ya*) engaging in the dissemination of Islamic knowledge through radio stations. The broadcasting of sermons by the radio stations provides the female preachers access to the public, facilitating their participation in the ethical discussion of various issues from an Islamic perspective. It is argued that this trend destabilises previous qualifications of religious authority. Therefore, this study analyses how the radio stations facilitate the ways in which Islam is presented to the public. Significantly, it explores the controversial status of the female voice as a medium of transmitting religious knowledge to the Muslim public, since *ulama* emphasise the importance of the voice as a mode of transmitting authoritative religious knowledge. In this respect, the study further asks, What is the role of the female voice as a means of expression of authoritative public speech?

KEYWORDS

Islam; female preachers; sermons; radio; media; Kenya

Introduction

The democratisation of the political space in the early 1990s was the turning point of the Kenyan Muslims as a community seeking political recognition and public prominence. Constitutional reforms together with the removal of the government monopoly of the media landscape expedited the launch of Muslim radio stations in Nairobi, Mombasa, and Garissa. This facilitated the conveying of live sermons and recorded radio lectures, and triggering debates on moral issues in the Muslim public. Most of the Islamic public sermonising in Kenya has historically been done by male clerics, but recently there is an emerging clique of female preachers engaging in this form of public participation on the

¹ This article is based on the research project "Mediated Sermons: Production, Women and Popular Themes," which received COFUND funding. At that time I worked as a Postdoctoral Fellow in 2013 at the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies, Freie Universität Berlin.

radio stations. Undoubtedly, the broadcasting of sermons, exhortations, and lectures (*mawaidha*) by the radio stations provides the female preachers access to the wider public, thereby enabling their participation in the ethical discussion of various social issues from an Islamic perspective. This trend destabilises previous qualifications of religious authority.²

Numerous studies on women's religious authority have been conducted in different Muslim societies. A recent study, closely related to the present study, is done by Frederick Madore and Muriel Gomez-Perez, on how "visibility and legitimacy" are being constructed by Muslim women in Burkina Faso. Their study presents young educated Burkinabe Muslim women who capitalise on the opportunities provided by the new technologies and the growth of Islamic media to increase their public profile and religious legitimacy. Although Burkinabe men have an exclusive privilege on the public discussion of religious matters in the Islamic media, this new technology is now enabling certain women to venture into this public space.³

The role of the media *vis-à-vis* religious authority is also explored by Dorothea Schulz, arguing that, due to the Malian state wielding control over the authorisation of preachers to perform on national media, and also owing to the competition generated by the explosion of local radio stations, the radio preachers' views of Muslim religiosity have resulted in a contested sphere. Consequently, the media landscape has turned into an arena characterised by a contentious public discussion between "Muslim intellectuals" and "freelance preachers" with different "levels of religious erudition and oratorical skills."⁴ This growing involvement with mass-mediated Islam should not, however, be seen as weakening the Muslims' religious conviction, but rather widening "the spectrum of forms of religious engagement and sociability."⁵

² Dorothea Schulz, "Evoking Moral Community, Fragmenting Muslim Discourse: Sermon Audio-Recordings and the Reconfiguration of Public Debate in Mali," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 27 (2007): 48.

³ Frederick Madore and Muriel Gomez-Perez, "Muslim Women in Burkina Faso since the 1970s: Toward Recognition as Figures of Religious Authority?" *Islamic Africa* 7. No.2 (2016): 185-209.

⁴ Dorothea Schulz, "Promises of (Im)mediate Salvation: Islam, Broadcast Media, and the Remaking of Religious Experience in Mali," *American Ethnologist* 33, no.2 (2006): 215.

⁵ Schulz, "Promises of (Im)mediate Salvation," 222.

Though there have been conscious efforts by respective Muslim societies to educate women with the intention of improving their religious knowledge,⁶ women continue to have difficulties in legitimating their Islamic knowledge.⁷ In overcoming the challenges posed to women's religious authority, deliberate steps by the state to feminise the religious discourse are evident in Morocco and Turkey. Meriem El Haitami highlights the Moroccan state's endeavours to train female religious scholars as *murshidat*, who are equipped with preaching and public speaking skills to counsel women in religious practices and social life. Their increased participation in the government's training programme demonstrates how these women construct their authority as religious leaders in the midst of challenges posed by male religious authorities.⁸ As in Morocco, Mona Hassan argues that in Turkey, the "state-sponsored female preachers are disrupting Turkish socio-cultural assumptions of the male voices as the exclusive voice of official religious authority."⁹

The democratisation process witnessed in Kenya in the 1990s affected Muslim women in different ways. First, due to the liberalisation of the media tools from state control, it allowed their accessibility to different sections of the population. As a result of the liberal political environment, numerous local FM radio stations were allowed to operate, including those inclined on religious orientation. Second, the process of democratisation promoted a pluralism that embraced female articulations of religious doctrines and texts.¹⁰ Whether espoused in a Salafi-Wahabi or Sufi framework,¹¹ the emerging group of female preachers is using their advanced religious knowledge to deliver sermons through the radio stations.

⁶ Elisha Renne, "Educating Muslim Women and the Izala Movement in Zaria City, Nigeria," *Islamic Africa* 3, no.1 (2012): 55-86.

⁷ Amber Gemmeke, "Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge," *Journal of the International African Institute* 79, no.1 (2009): 128-47.

⁸ Meriem El Haitami, "Restructuring Female Religious Authority: State-Sponsored Women Religious Guides (*Murshidat*) and Scholars (*'Alimat*) in Contemporary Morocco," *Mediterranean Studies* 20, no.2 (2012): 227-40.

⁹ Mona Hassan, "Women Preaching for the Secular State: Official Female Preachers (*Bayan Vaizler*) in Contemporary Turkey," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no.3 (2011): 451.

¹⁰ Ousseina Alidou, *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya: Leadership, Representation and Social Change* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 146.

¹¹ Salafi-Wahabi is a puritanical Islamic reforming group promoting a rigid and supposedly correct interpretation of Islamic texts. On the other hand, Sufism is a mystical Islamic belief and practice known for incorporating folk practices, viewed by orthodox Muslims as being un-Islamic.

Though men have held a near-monopoly over the public religious leadership for much of Islamic history, this tendency is changing with Muslim women being allowed to take an active role in the transmission of Islamic knowledge (*ilm*) in different parts of the world.¹² Muslim women are now publicly speaking for Islam as preachers, teachers, and interpreters of religious texts on various platforms. In complementing other existing studies on women's active involvement as authorities in Islamic knowledge, this article answers the question, How have the Muslim radio stations in Kenya facilitated and influenced the ways in which Islam is presented in the public? It is observed that since the establishing of Muslim radio stations in Kenya, they have provided opportunities to a diversity of interpreters of Islam interested in communicating religious knowledge to the Muslim communities. In particular, the article explores the role that the stations have played in the creation of female religious authority.

In this article, religious authority is primarily associated with roles that demand the mastery of Islamic knowledge (Qur'an and Hadith) i.e. teaching, preaching, interpreting texts, leading prayers, and providing guidance on religious matters. In other words, religious authority is here viewed as the ability of a knowledgeable person (both male and female) to influence others, irrespective of their gender "through performing and teaching exemplary knowledge and piety."¹³ Generally, female religious authority exists and is accepted among the Kenyan Muslim communities, although within certain limitations. Thus, despite their acceptance, female Islamic authority in Kenya, as shown in this article, is restricted by the common traditional gender customs being evident elsewhere in most Muslim societies. In Kenya, female public space is available for "public" worshipping and exhortation, which are strictly governed by gendered public rules of interaction. Thus, the emerging female preachers uphold the conservative gendered social structures expressed by the male *ulama* (scholars on religious matters) in the country. They are reluctant to challenge the existing system for fear of losing the preaching platforms available to them at the Muslim radio stations. Their adherence to the "acceptable" religious and social norms guarantees their participation in the Muslim public sphere.

¹² Massooda Bano and Hillary Kalmbach (eds.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1.

¹³ Britta Frede and Joseph Hill, "Introduction: En-gendered Islamic Authority in West Africa," *Islamic Africa* 5, no.2 (2014): 150.

While learned Muslim women in Kenya have also contributed in transmitting Islamic knowledge as Qur'anic schoolteachers,¹⁴ only their male counterparts occupy the public platform to articulate religious thoughts as public preachers delivering *mawaidha* to the communities. Such societal arrangements and attitudes are reinforced by the view that Muslim women, despite their advanced education, are not supposed to speak in public or even to engage in a public disputation of religious matters. However, this notion is being put into question with the appearance of female preachers on radio stations to offer *mawaidha* to the Muslim public. The establishment of the Muslim radio stations has enabled the female preachers to enter the public space that has traditionally been dominated by men. Therefore, this article endeavours to examine the phenomenon of female religious preachers, through an analysis of how the Muslim radio stations have created a structure for their public participation.

The article focuses on the female preachers on the Muslim radio stations, since this space has the potential to enable any Muslim preacher (both male and female) to exert an influence over the religious and social practices of the communities. This is because radio sermons are easily accessible to people lacking strong literacy and religious training and has the potential of being the most attractive religious commodity to consume. Significantly, the article will also explore the controversial status of the female voice as a medium of transmitting religious knowledge to the Muslim public. Muslim *ulama* have emphasised the importance of the voice as mode of transmitting authoritative religious knowledge. In this respect, I am interested in interrogating the role of the female voice as a means of expression and debates over authoritative public speech.

Female Religious Authority in Kenya

A chain of women educators in religious knowledge has already existed amongst the Kenyan Muslim communities. However, notwithstanding their level of Islamic knowledge, their instructional role was restricted to the traditional *chuo* (pl. *vyuo*), which is a simple shelter or a room in someone's house where a small group of children under the supervision of a single teacher are taught to read and memorise the Qur'an.¹⁵ This

¹⁴ Alidou, *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya*.

¹⁵ Hassan Mwakimako, Hassan Ndzovu, and Justin Willis, "Trends in Kenyan Islam," Research Report (Nairobi, 2009), 21-2.

development is a reflection of the extent to which Muslim women were denied opportunities to pursue higher Islamic learning beyond the “necessary” basics. Even reputable early Muslim scholars in Kenya, like Sheikh Al-Amin Ali Mazrui (died in 1947) and Sheikh Sayyid Ali Badawi (died in 1963) did not make efforts to recruit and encourage women to advance their knowledge in Islamic education.¹⁶ What could have attributed to this scenario?

Traditionally, the institutions of Islamic authority such as the caliph, the *alim* (scholar), the *mufti* (legal scholar who offers legal opinions), the *kadhi* (judge who delivers binding rulings), the Sufi Sheikh (mystical leaders), and the *khatib* (mosque preacher) have historically been occupied by the male members of the society.¹⁷ Although women were sometimes afforded opportunities to attain significant high levels of learning, they were still excluded from occupying public offices as *muftis* and *kadhis*. The male *ulama* regarded women to be unfit to qualify for these public positions because of their supposed ability to distract the attention of the males in their company.¹⁸ Studies indicate that numerous “Sunni Muslim scholars have associated feminine sexuality” with the potential “to trigger *fitna* (corruption, temptation)” in society.¹⁹ This sexualisation of women’s bodies and voices is common in multiple religious traditions as well as in patriarchal societies. Consequently, as shown elsewhere in this article, women try to embrace more husky voices so as not to sound too feminine lest they trigger unholy thoughts and sexual temptations to male audiences.

The *ulama* class, which is generally associated with a scholarly religious authority, was attained after a considerable period of training and proven display of acceptable religious behaviour, “with periodic disputation” before “other male scholars.”²⁰ This process of preparing a scholarly religious authority excluded the women whose presence is controlled in the public spheres. “Even with advanced education there is limited space

¹⁶ Aidou, *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya*, 63.

¹⁷ Hilary Kalmbach, “Social and Religious Change in Damascus: One Case of Female Islamic Religious Authority,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no.1 (2008): 37-57; Bano and Kalmbach (eds.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques*, 4.

¹⁸ Kalmbach, “Social and Religious Change in Damascus.”

¹⁹ Britta Frede, “Following in the Steps of Aisha: Hassaniyya-Speaking Tijani Women as Spiritual Guides (*Muqaddamat*) and Teaching Islamic Scholars (*Limrabutat*) in Mauritania,” *Islamic Africa* 5, no.2 (2014): 244.

²⁰ Kalmbach, “Social and Religious Change in Damascus,” 44.

for women to articulate their knowledge in the public, as they are expected to remain relatively in private,” Sele Mzamil Omar Mzamil observed.²¹ The fundamental purpose of women accessing religious knowledge is the recognition of their role as “the cornerstone around which the Islamic family is built.”²² Mzamil²³ added that

the elementary education they acquired was not to prepare them as preachers or imam of a mosque, but was to enable her to appreciate her existence as a Muslim; and to raise her children in a proper way – being the main source of knowledge – as respectful and responsible people who recognize God.

Thus, for a Muslim woman to be able to disseminate the religious knowledge to her children, it is assumed that she should be familiar with the primary texts of the principal sources of Islamic knowledge: the Qur’an and the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad.

This conservative Muslim view of restricting a Muslim woman’s religious education to the “necessary” basics, counter the efforts of Mwalim Azara Mudira who in 1987 established the Ma’had boarding school for advanced Islamic theological training for Muslim women in Kenya. Established in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, the mission of the school is “to challenge the exclusionary male-centered tradition of advanced education in Islamic studies and to create an alternative space for authoritative intervention by Muslim women Islamic scholars in the religious realm.”²⁴ Though Muslim women received less incentives to advance their Islamic knowledge because they were not expected to be scholars (*ulama*) of religion,²⁵ there is a section of female preachers in Kenya who have successfully advanced their religious training through various initiatives. For example, with the support from her family, Bi-Nafisa Khitamy Badawi has emerged as one of the highly respected female religious authorities in Kenya (and maybe the East African region, according to my respondents). It is alleged that the Islamic knowledge that Bi-Nafisa received was intended to “prepare her to be a scholar,” given that she descended

²¹ Interview with Sele Mzamil Omar Mzamil, Director of Magic Studios, on 23 December 2013, Mombasa.

²² Kalmbach, “Social and Religious Change in Damascus,” 46.

²³ Interview with Sele Mzamil Omar Mzamil.

²⁴ Alidou, *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya*, 61.

²⁵ Michael Lambek, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery and Spirit Possession* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

from one of the families of leading Muslim scholars in Kenya, Sheikh Sayyid Ali Badawi.²⁶ Similar sentiments of family support were expressed by her namesake Nafisa Abdurahaman Said who interpreted her advanced attainment of religious knowledge as an indication of a scholar, positing: “I think I am a scholar by default. Since scholarship is in my lineage, I decided to undertake studies later after my marriage. I am here today through the support of my family members.”²⁷

Clearly, religious learning among these women was due to the support of their relatives, and upon completion, they began to offer religious instruction to other women. Apart from family ties, other learned women have also successfully secured the entitlement of religious authority due to self-training, a pious lifestyle, and devotion to the activities of *da'wah*. This includes women such as Fatma Mohammed (Radio Salaam), Abla Nahida (Radio Salaam), and Ima Hamisi (Radio Rahma). In various parts of Kenya, a few learned women have appeared who have dedicated their efforts to enhance opportunities for other women to access advanced education in Islamic knowledge.²⁸ Gradually, the emerging category of female religious scholars is attaining recognition in the Kenyan Muslim communities, since they are considered knowledgeable and thereby in a position to “act as an authoritative personality” whenever a chance is availed to them.²⁹ Due to their advanced education in Islamic knowledge, these women are assigned religious radio programmes available in the country to deliver *mawaidha* and *nasihah* (counselling), all grounded in the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet. How these Muslim radio stations that offer the learned Muslim women an opportunity to convey public sermons, operate, is a theme examined in the section below.

Muslim Radio Stations in Mombasa: Response to “Indecency” and “Immorality” in Kenyan Broadcasting Culture

The religious media in Kenya expanded in “the context of political democratization and media liberalization” as evident in other parts of

²⁶ Interview with Nafisa Abdurahaman Said, 2 January 2014, Darul-Saada, Mombasa.

²⁷ Interview with Nafisa Abdurahaman Said.

²⁸ Alidou, *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya*, 63.

²⁹ Frede and Hill, “Introduction: En-gendered Islamic Authority in West Africa,” 152.

Africa in the 1990s.³⁰ This liberalisation spurred the proliferation of Muslim radio stations, which sprung out of the concern by Muslims that Christian religious programmes occupy more airspace than Islamic lectures broadcast on national radio and television stations. The government-run broadcasting corporation television (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) had around ten regular – recently increased to about 20 – Christian programmes each week, while Muslim viewers have up to the present been allotted only half an hour programme per week, *Ukumbi wa Kiislamu* (the Islamic Forum).

The current liberal political environment has facilitated the rapid growth of local FM radio stations in recent years, thereby offering opportunities for religious broadcasting. By the nature of FM broadcasting in the country, the reach of these religious broadcasters is localised, allowing them to develop a substantial influence in the areas they cover.³¹ There are three licensed Muslim radio stations – Iqra, Salaam, and Rahma – compared to several Christian broadcasters in the country, like Baraka FM (interdenominational), Biblia Husema, Family FM (interdenominational), Hope FM (Pentecostal), Imani FM (interdenominational), Sayare FM (interdenominational), and Waumini FM (Catholic). Although there are two radio stations in Garissa town – Star FM and Frontier Radio – that broadcast some Islamic programmes in the local Somali language, these stations have no clear Islamic agenda.³² It is assumed that through their programmes the Muslim radio stations succeed in disseminating religious knowledge to new converts, non-Muslims, and a wide section of the Muslim population.

Of the three Muslim religious broadcasts, Iqra is the oldest station being established in 1999 by the partnership of the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM) and some individual Muslims in the country. Its broadcast range is not confined to the Nairobi area, but it has spread to other regions within its Transmission Area of Service to include Arusha in the neighbouring Tanzania. Later, the establishment of Radio Rahma and afterwards Radio Salaam, both in the coastal city of Mombasa, followed this station. Invariably, these radio stations host programmes catering for female preachers, addressing, though not

³⁰ Tilo Gratz, "Christian Religious Radio Production in Benin: The Case of Radio Maranatha," *Social Compass* 6, no.1 (2014): 58.

³¹ Mwakimako, Ndzovu, and Willis, "Trends in Kenyan Islam," 1-32.

³² Mwakimako, Ndzovu, and Willis, "Trends in Kenyan Islam."

always, women's issues. My focus in this article will be on the two radio stations in coastal Kenya – Radio Rahma and Radio Salaam – which are informed by the fact that the female preachers involved in this study deliver their radio programmes of religious exhortation on them.

Radio Rahma began broadcasting as an Islamic station at the end of 2004, occupying a less outstanding building on the mainland of Mombasa with tiny offices and the basic equipment. However, despite this lower outward appearance, the station is “visible and audible along the coast.”³³ The station commenced as a commercial radio station, “under the name Pulse FM, and later decided to turn into an Islamic station in cultural terms to address the issue of ‘indecent and immorality’,” which is “popular with the broadcasting culture in the country. It was the cultural and religious imperative that gave the initial impetus to the station, and this continues to be an important integral part of its appeal.”³⁴ Currently the station covers the entire coastal region, especially the lower coast from Vanga to Lamu, while in the inland, the station has extended up to Taru, which is far away from the Taita region – the coastal uplands. In their desire to cover the dominantly inhabited Muslim regions of the country, the station secured a frequency to cover the Garissa area, which is situated in the northeastern region of the country and predominantly inhabited by Somali Muslims. To present an image of an international radio, the station has a website that listeners abroad could use to access its programmes through streaming.

On the other hand, Radio Salaam was founded in 2006 and occupies a more extravagant office than its local competitor – Radio Rahma – in a tower building at the centre of Mombasa city.³⁵ With the enormous investment done by Radio Salaam in procuring the latest equipment including an Out Broadcasting Van (OBV), Radio Rahma seems to be struggling financially. In their self-appraisal, Radio Salaam boasts to be the only station in the region with an OBV, yet asserting that it is barely relying on advertisements to run its activities and remain operational. The station has attracted several sponsors whose needs are catered to by the various packages of advertisement offered: commercial, activation within one hour, classified, and sponsorship. Depending on the advertisement package, one can sponsor the *adhan*, Qur'an recitation, and the

³³ Mwakimako, Ndzovu, and Willis, “Trends in Kenyan Islam.”

³⁴ Mwakimako, Ndzovu, and Willis, “Trends in Kenyan Islam.”

³⁵ Mwakimako, Ndzovu, and Willis, “Trends in Kenyan Islam.”

dhikr (devotional acts of worship), among other programmes.³⁶ Correspondingly, Radio Rahma operates with a budget that directly depends on advertisements as captured in the words of its news editor: “The source of revenue is only advertisement. We do all types of advertisement except the ones [that] go against [the] Islamic law e.g. alcohol, family planning, pork [etc].”³⁷

Like any modern company, Radio Salaam engages in corporate social responsibility activities. Some of its corporate responsibility initiatives to society include the distribution of relief food to famine stricken communities facing starvation at the coast; sponsoring football teams (in Garissa and Mombasa) and tournaments in Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa and Kwale; organising children fanfare through their programme, *Jarida la Watoto* (The Children’s Magazine); and assisting orphans within the region. More so, the station organises road shows as a way of reaching out to their fans and making the station visible.³⁸ As a gesture of giving back to the society, Radio Rahma does not have elaborate social responsibility activities, but offers various goodies to orphanages during the month of Ramadan.³⁹

Despite these differences, the content of the two Muslim stations seems similar. They both devote a substantial amount of broadcast time to Qur’an recitations, doctrinal matters and programmes where *ulama* give advice on practical matters concerning living as a Muslim. In Radio Rahma, some of the supposedly religious programme broadcasts include *Kikao cha Fiqh* (The Jurisprudence Session), *Visa vya Maswahaba* (Stories of the Companion of the Prophet), *Hadith ya Wiki* (Hadith of the Week), *Wasia wa Ijumaa* (The Friday Counsel), and *Ibada si Ada* (Worship is not Custom).⁴⁰ A further ambition of Radio Rahma is the effort to broadcast the Friday worship live from a number of mosques, which mostly comprise of Masjid Junda, Masjid Kilifi, Masjid Qadiriyya, Masjid Konzi, and Masjid Nurein. In similar measure, Radio Salaam has also approached mosques that they alternate in relaying their Friday worship live, including Masjid Rahma, Masjid Luta, Masjid ummul Kulthum, Masjid sheikh Ibrahim, and Masjid Hudaa (all in Mom-

³⁶ Interview with Ibrahim Mohammed of Radio Rahma, 16 December 2014, Mombasa.

³⁷ Interview with Faiz Musa, News Editor, Radio Rahma, 3 January 2014, Mombasa.

³⁸ Interview with Ibrahim Mohammed, 16 December 2014.

³⁹ Interview with Faiz Musa.

⁴⁰ Interview with Faiz Musa.

basa), and Masjid Landhis and Jamia Masjid (in Nairobi).⁴¹ Though these mosques are not connected to the radio stations, their choices are to a certain extent attributed to a specific doctrinal orientation of the owners of the Muslim radio stations as shown below. Typically, such shows consist of a small production team visiting a mosque and then transmit its Friday worship to the listeners. Regularly, listening to religious programmes and the broadcasted Friday worship give people the feeling that they are “good Muslims” by constantly attuning their ear to listening to God’s word. This practice is similar to the one described as “desires for immediacy” by Tilo Gratz.⁴²

In addition to the straightforward Islamic broadcasting, the two stations incorporate general news, current affairs and entertainment programming, which are presented from an Islamic perspective, but often without any explicit Islamic message. The Islamic broadcasting forms the bedrock of the programmes of the stations, because there is a strong audience response to programmes that offer religious guidance and instruction. The success of Radio Rahma and Radio Salaam is apparent from both their steady expansions in terms of staff and broadcast range and from the growing pool of listeners attracted by the variety of programmes that include religion, news, and entertainment. The listeners expect the two stations to offer news that is relevant and non-biased towards Muslims.⁴³

An emphasis on listening and broadcasting the views of audiences as expressed in call-ins or by SMS, has encouraged coastal Muslims to identify with these stations. As a result, the two stations could be described as almost an entirely coastal phenomenon. Though most of their programmes are done in the Swahili language interspersed with English recorded lectures, Radio Salaam also has a substantial broadcasting profile in Somali – the Somali hour. This interest in the Somali language in a predominantly “Swahili zone” is supported by the fact that the station is owned by a powerful Kenyan Somali family and also covers the Garissa region that is mostly inhabited by ethnic Somalis.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Interview with Ibrahim Mohammed, 16 December 2014.

⁴² Gratz, “Christian Religious Radio Production in Benin,” 61.

⁴³ Mwakimako, Ndzovu, and Willis, “Trends in Kenyan Islam.”

⁴⁴ Mwakimako, Ndzovu, and Willis, “Trends in Kenyan Islam.”

Even though the Muslim stations do not present their mission as a proselytising one, Islamisation and the dissemination of Islamic knowledge are considered to be paramount. For the invited religious female speakers, the Muslim radio stations become an important tool for transmitting Islamic knowledge. By establishing a reputation as a source of Islamic teachings and values, the two religious radio stations anticipate to attract audiences with shared moral values. However, what is most striking about the two radio stations is that their news coverage and discussions are strongly Kenyan, both in topics and perspectives. For instance, Radio Rahma attempts to offer news and a current affairs coverage that counter the perceived bias of “mainstream media,” thereby playing a sort of advocacy role. This is evident in the content of call-ins and SMS contributions from listeners during discussions of current affairs, suggesting a close involvement in the Kenyan political culture and debates. It is common that broadcasts and comments are mostly about current Kenyan issues: the politics of the ruling party and opposition, as well as corruption in government, among others. Both the content of programmes and the listeners’ input locate them in a national, Kenyan perspective. This may, of course, be the result of some self-censorship done by the broadcasters and audience, who are inevitably aware that they may be under hostile scrutiny.⁴⁵

Generally, within the public domain there is a strong impression that associates Radio Rahma with the camp of *watu wa maulidi* (the people of maulid),⁴⁶ while Radio Salaam is regarded by some Muslims as pushing a particular Salafi agenda. This view is utterly refuted by Faiz Musa of Radio Rahma, claiming that the notion is a creation of the public. Nevertheless, it is possible that this perception is formulated due to the fact that most of the sheikhs invited to Radio Rahma are individuals that are sympathetic with the *watu wa maulidi* camp (people of maulidi), while those going to Radio Salaam are inclined towards Wahabi ideas and teachings. This scenario has been interpreted as merely accidental and not as an official policy of the religious stations.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Mwakimako, Ndzovu, and Willis, “Trends in Kenyan Islam.”

⁴⁶ This refers to the group of Muslims who continues to celebrate the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (*maulidi*).

⁴⁷ Interview with Faiz Musa; Interview with Ibrahim Mohammed of Radio Rahma, 20 December 2013, Mombasa.

Despite the sectarian association of the radio stations by the Muslim public, both broadcasters contend on a non-discrimination approach when inviting religious speakers. Irrespective of their gender, the most important benchmark for a religious speaker to be summoned is to exhibit the ability to address issues without antagonising the Muslim community and displaying wisdom when responding to controversial topics. Though it is a fact that the Muslims at the coast are split into camps – the people of maulidi and the Wahabi – the invited religious speakers at Radio Rahma are expected to be people who have not shown an inclination toward a specific camp in their public dealings. An official of the radio station remarked to me: “We do not invite speakers who are known to belong to a specific camp, because we know they will raise tension and controversy.”⁴⁸ This view is in line with the station’s insistence on a non-discrimination policy that disregards the sectarian leaning of their religious speakers and emphasises their knowledge, which is deemed significant to the community. Perhaps to ensure that their religious programmes meet a certain threshold and that the invited speakers fit the station’s mission, Radio Salaam has established an advisory group of male *ulama* to advise on content. This “vetting board” has created some tension between the broadcasters and the *ulama*, as the latter forbids things that the former considers would be popular with audiences.⁴⁹

While Radio Rahma does not have a regulating board to evaluate sermons before they are aired, speakers on the religious programmes have to be endorsed by the station manager who is also an imam and uses his discretion to recommend to the station his colleagues who are fitting the “non-controversial” tag.⁵⁰ A similar expression of non-discrimination is echoed by an employee of Radio Salaam, indicating that “we are open to both sides of the divide, but there are topics that we cannot allow, topics that are either confusing to the *ummah*, or will lead to the *ummah* being divided. Therefore, a pro-maulid sheikh cannot talk about maulid, or an anti-maulid sheikh bring a topic at Radio Salaam to attack the maulid. It is the same with Jihad and other sensitive topics.”⁵¹ As a result, *ulama* holding different doctrinal positions are invited to the station, upon receiving an endorsement from the vetting board of *ulama*.

⁴⁸ Interview with Faiz Musa.

⁴⁹ Mwakimako, Ndzovu, and Willis, “Trends in Kenyan Islam.”

⁵⁰ Interview with Faiz Musa.

⁵¹ Interview with Ibrahim Mohammed, 16 December 2013.

Despite the supposed tolerance by the station, Radio Salaam emphasises that the station is strictly guided by following the practice of Prophet Muhammad and his companions⁵² – a view that has traditionally been associated with Salafism. Irrespective of the two radio stations' affiliation, they both provide a forum for female preachers to exercise their religious authority and interact with the larger Muslim community in the public space – a theme explored in the next section.

Public Sermonising of Female Preachers on the Muslim Radio Stations

Religious programmes designated by the Muslim radio stations are important spaces for the performance and transmission of Islamic knowledge. Thus, the radio stations, Radio Rahma and Radio Salaam, provide important forums for female preachers to demonstrate their religious knowledge to Kenya's Muslim public. With both stations, women's broadcasting is primarily intended for female audiences despite the awareness of the existence of male callers whom the stations would wish to be silent during the interactive programmes. Inasmuch as the radio stations desire to segregate their listeners, they would require monitoring capabilities to enable them to detect and implement gender control, a task that is at the moment overwhelming and challenging.⁵³ At Radio Rahma, only three religious programmes are allocated to the female preachers, namely *Ukumbi wa Wanawake* (The Women's Forum), *Darsa la Wanawake* (The Women's Gathering), and *Wasaa wa Wanawake* (The Women's Space). Of these programmes, only *Ukumbi wa Wanawake* is a live and interactive programme that allows listeners to call or send SMSs.⁵⁴ In the case of Radio Salaam, only one interactive programme, *Bustani la Wanawake* (Women's Garden), is allocated for the female preachers.⁵⁵

Generally, radio preachers, irrespective of their gender, are expected to display a certain level of advanced scholarship in religious knowledge. The lectures of the female preachers, broadcast regularly on the two Muslim radio stations in Mombasa, focus on religious instruction and moral advice that do not necessarily address women. Their sermons capture "the eschatological themes of death, judgment and suffering"

⁵² Interview with Ibrahim Mohammed, 16 December 2013.

⁵³ Interview with Faiz Musa.

⁵⁴ Interview with Faiz Musa.

⁵⁵ Interview with Ibrahim Mohammed, 16 December 2013.

which are assumed to be significant in inculcating certain ethical Islamic virtues – humility, fear of God, and modesty.⁵⁶ There is no doubt that the female preachers have to rely on the Muslim radio stations to publicly articulate their views of proper Muslim conduct and practice to an unrestricted audience. Without the radio stations, the female preachers would have difficulties of extending their audience beyond their respective local women learning circles.

The usage of the radio stations allows a wide accessibility and effective mode of engaging with the Muslim public. In the interactive programmes, listeners are allowed to call the presenters with various questions seeking clarification on a myriad of issues, after which the female preachers deliver their responses live on air. This approach indicates the female preachers' acceptance as authorities, since the people trust them with their questions as they endeavour to be "better" Muslims. The appropriation of the new broadcast medium by some of the female preachers provides them with a platform to add their voices on religious matters within the Muslim public. Capitalising on the opportunities presented by new technologies, a number of women – both young and old – have embarked on disseminating religious knowledge through the Muslim radio stations, which is viewed as a form of *da'wah* to the *ummah*. These women are often respected teachers in the Qur'anic and secular schools, offering instruction in religious matters and Arabic literacy in their respective institutions.⁵⁷ As a result of their educational attainment and reputation, their radio sermons are popular among their audiences as demonstrated in their interactive programmes. The careers of these female preachers began as instructors of Muslim women's learning circles in their neighbourhoods, thereby restricting their lessons to these smaller groups. After the group instructors attain recognition as a religious authority, they are often invited by the local Muslim radio stations to extend their teachings to a wider female radio audience.⁵⁸

The increasing participation of the female preachers on the radio sermons and the demonstration of their religious knowledge have raised the need to re-evaluate how the Islamic authority is legitimised. The

⁵⁶ Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 42.

⁵⁷ Interview with Fatma Mohammed at Radio Salaam, 28 December 2013, Mombasa; Interview with Nafisa Abdurahaman Said; Interview with Ukht Ima Hamisi at Radio Rahma, 3 January 2014, Mombasa.

⁵⁸ Interview with Nafisa Abdurahaman Said; Interview with Faiz Musa.

radio sermons have facilitated the emergence of alternatives to a face-to-face knowledge transmission. They enable the female preachers to connect with a wide audience irrespective of gender. Clearly, these radio sermons of female preachers seem to challenge the longstanding sole influence of the male preachers as the bearers of Islamic knowledge. In this process, the female preachers supplement the male preachers' activities in disseminating religious knowledge. At the radio stations, female preachers' sermons are not regulated, indicating an acceptance and recognition of their advanced religious training.⁵⁹ Despite this apparent approval, the Muslim radio stations usually broadcast the sermons of the female preachers for free, thereby holding a considerable say in regulating the contents of the sermons. Both Radio Rahma and Radio Salaam are commercial stations that are managed by individuals representing specific doctrinal positions among the Kenyan Muslims. There is no doubt that the invited speakers have to be sensitive to the doctrinal affiliation of the owners of the radio stations.

The female religious radio programmes are anticipated to encourage a wide female participation with increased women's call-ins,⁶⁰ especially during the interactive slots. This policy of allocating certain religious programmes to the female preachers and insisting that they address their respective gender, appears to restrict their religious authority. The female focus supports the widely held opinion by conservative Muslims that it is desirable for women to be taught by a female teacher. Such categorisation suggests that the authority of these female preachers is limited as they cannot address the entire *ummah*, but only a section of the population of their religious community. Despite efforts to assign the female preachers a public space through the radio stations, it is clear that they are expected to lecture a specific gender. Despite their exceptional position as female preachers, they are confronted with certain challenges in legitimating their *da'wah* activities. Not only do they need to convince the male *ulama* that they are well-educated, they also have to convince them that they possess qualities that are naturally associated with men, like a voice. In this way, they must persuade the *ulama* that, despite being women, their voice is not soft and seductive, but deep and less feminine as demonstrated below.

⁵⁹ Interview with Fatma Mohammed; Interview with Nafisa Abdurahaman Said; Interview with Ukht Ima Hamisi.

⁶⁰ Interview with Faiz Musa.

The Ambiguity of Women's Voices and Contested Religious Authority of Female Preachers

Admittedly, the radio programmes of the female preachers signal the ambiguous acceptance of their role in delivering sermons and contributing to *da'wah* in the Muslim communities. As they continue to offer exhortations on the radio, the female preachers are confronted with the prevailing belief that classifies their voices as nakedness (*aura*), and also questioning their competency as religious authorities responsible for *da'wah*. Some of the female preachers have received criticism for their religious radio sermons from a section of the male clerics. Their presence on the radio is questioned by the conservative *ulama* as well as some male supporters of the Salafi-Wahabi tendencies. Mzamil of Magic Studio, recording religious programmes, denounces Muslim females' preaching on the grounds that women are not authorised to engage in this activity. Providing textual support for his claim, he quotes: "Men are protectors (*Qawwam*) and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from their means (Sura 4:34)." He argues that this Qur'anic verse stipulates that males are supposed to be the guardians (*viongozi*) of women, which in a way questions the religious authority of the female speakers. He also quotes the Hadith as evidence of excluding women in managing public affairs in Muslim societies: "[T]hose who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity."⁶¹ Armed with the two textual evidences, Mzamil goes further to explain his understanding of the issue of women and *da'wah* in Islam by emphatically arguing:

So why should we allow female preachers to engage in *da'wah* to propagate Islam while there are men who can undertake this duty. If there was need for women to address the *ummah* as propagators of the faith, then God would also have sent to humanity as example female prophets. Why did God not send female prophets? Clearly, the responsibility of learning the faith and propagate it to the *ummah* has been bestowed upon a specific category of people – the males. So if women had similar mandate, God would have also sent female prophets.⁶²

Clearly, Mzamil's view reinforces a misogynistic reading of the religious texts that have been disputed by a section of progressive voices within

⁶¹ Interview with Sele Mzamil Omar Mzamil.

⁶² Interview with Sele Mzamil Omar Mzamil.

Islam.⁶³ Certainly, the textual sources present an “ambivalent image of female existence, allowing interpreters to develop diverse modes of gendered ritual and social practice.”⁶⁴ Responding to the question of the lack of female prophets in Islamic history, Amina Wadud-Muhsin posits:

Both men and women have been included in divine communication as the recipient of *wahy*, but there is no Qur’anic example of a woman with the responsibility of *risala*. However, all those chosen for this responsibility were exceptional...In fact, given the difficulty they have faced in getting others to accept the message when these exceptional men have come from poor classes, the likelihood of failure for the message might have been greater if women, who are given so little regard in most societies, were selected to deliver the message. It is strategy for effectiveness, not a statement of divine preference.⁶⁵

Similarly, the Hadith quoted by Mzamil and purportedly heard by Abu Bakra (died in 671), one of the notable people of Basra during the conflict between Aisha and Caliph Ali, has been criticised as a politically opportune Hadith. After Caliph Ali successfully defeated the coalition of Aisha in the battle of Camel, Abu Bakra is reported to have narrated the Hadith to demonstrate his loyalty to the caliph after having been indecisive at the beginning of the conflict. His earlier indifferent attitude to the conflict was not to be interpreted that he supported the other party who was in fact being led by a woman – a practice that Prophet Muhammad is alleged to have condemned. The Hadith in question has been debated by Muslim scholars with some doubting its reliability and the justification of excluding women in the public sphere.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, the view expressed by Mzamil represents the ongoing debate on the acceptability of women who preach, and their presence on radio as evident among the coastal Muslims of Kenya. The criticism of the appearance of the female radio preachers is due to the perception in Muslim societies that the sphere of public communication is the domain of men. The condemnation of female preachers’ radio sermons by some Muslims demonstrates the challenges generated by the technologies of

⁶³ Cf. Amina Wadud-Muhsin, “Qur’an and Women,” in *Liberal Islam*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127-38; Fatima Mernissi, “A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Right in Islam,” in *Liberal Islam*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 112-26.

⁶⁴ Frede, “Following in the Steps of Aisha,” 244.

⁶⁵ Wadud-Muhsin, “Qur’an and Women,” 133.

⁶⁶ Mernissi, “A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Right in Islam,” 112-26.

the transmission of religious knowledge. As a result, it raises questions about the activity of female preaching and of religious authority, as well as the questions, Who is authorised to speak for Islam in public?⁶⁷ and, Does speaking on the radio make female speakers Islamic preachers and religious authorities?

In responding to the issue of *aura*, the radio stations maintain that the participation of the female preachers in the radio programmes does not contradict the Islamic position that regards her voice to be nakedness. Both stations argue that “[t]here is no conflict because these are programs that are most listened to by women.”⁶⁸ Their participation in radio sermonising is not considered as addressing the *ummah*, but rather women who are alleged to prefer listening to their fellow women. Apart from the women being the main audience, the two broadcasters added that the female preachers “speak with a lot of respect,” a view suggesting that their voices are not perceived as feminine and seductive. Consequently, there is a deliberate effort to constantly select those female preachers (*ustadha*) whose voices are not regarded as soft and seductive.

On their part, the female preachers consider their sermonising on the radio stations as comparable to being behind the “curtain.” “For me being at the radio station is similar to being behind a curtain, a strategy that Aisha used to conceal herself while addressing her male students,” one of the female preachers argued.⁶⁹ According to Islamic history, Aisha – the wife of Prophet Muhammad – was very knowledgeable on Islamic matters and several *swahabas* (companions of Prophet Muhammad) went to her to seek religious knowledge, but behind a curtain. Therefore, “as Bibi Aisha was behind the curtain, I am in the same way today behind the ‘microphone’,” Fatma, one of the female preachers added.⁷⁰ In equating a radio station to a curtain, the female preachers emphasised that it is “possible to interact with the public without people [read men] seeing me.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ Dorothea Schulz, “Dis/embodying Authority: Female Radio ‘Preachers’ and the Ambivalences of Mass-mediated Speech in Mali,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44 (2012): 32.

⁶⁸ Interview with Ibrahim Mohammed 20 December 2013; Interview with Faiz Musa.

⁶⁹ Interview with Fatma Mohammed; Interview with Nafisa Abdurahaman Said; Interview with Ukht Ima Hamisi.

⁷⁰ Interview with Fatma Mohammed.

⁷¹ Interview with Ukht Ima Hamisi.

Despite the spirited defence to justify their participation in public sermonising, there is also self-criticism by the female preachers as demonstrated by Nafisa who describes her situation as being a “conflicting position” every time she participates in radio sermons.⁷² They are aware that, during their radio shows, there is also a male audience following the programme, but whom they would prefer to be “silent listeners.” The female preachers emphasised that they do not have a problem with the silent participation of the male listeners if they would use their radio sermons as a forum for accessing religious knowledge, but if the male audience’s intention is to entertain themselves with the presumed woman’s tender voice, then it is this behaviour that would render their involvement in the production of mediated sermons with distaste.

Such a notion raises the question: What is it about the tone of a woman’s voice that is considered disrespectful when conveying religious sermons? It is clear that the issue of *aura* is about the voice of the woman and religious authority. The female preachers justify their sermonising on radio by claiming that their voices are not soft, feminine, or seductive, but deep and masculine. As stated by Ukht Ima Hamisi, “The voice of a woman is *aura* when it sounds very sexy and seductive. For me, my voice is strong/deep like that of a man. This is why, when I am in the studio talking, you wouldn’t know whether it is a man or a woman talking.”⁷³ The view by Hamisi raises the question: Is religious authority in Islam associated with a male voice? Ironically, these female preachers unanimously retorted that “if a woman is aware that her voice can create *fitna*, then it is forbidden to speak through the media [both on CD/DVD and radio].”⁷⁴

To them and their critics, a sweet and soft voice of a woman is capable of stimulating the opposite sex and attracting strong sexual desires. Arguably, it is not true that all men hear the high and soft voices of women in this manner, but some are attracted to the deep and sultry voice of the opposite sex. Clearly, female preachers in coastal Kenya are compelled to talk with a “manly” voice in order for them to be accepted and provided with a platform to articulate issues concerning their faith. The foregoing comment demonstrates that critics of the radio-mediated

⁷² Interview with Nafisa Abdurahaman Said.

⁷³ Interview with Ukht Ima Hamisi.

⁷⁴ Interview with Fatma Mohammed.

sermons of the female preachers support the commonly held opinion by Muslims “that women should not be allowed to preach in public because of the seductiveness of their voices.”⁷⁵ In their effort to address a wide constituency of Muslims on the radio, the female preachers in Kenya are unable to operate outside the societal understanding of sexual ethics within Islam. One could therefore never expect the radio sermons to facilitate the free expression of the females within the Muslim public.⁷⁶ The authority exercised by female preachers is limited, because the conservative norms that govern the mainstream Muslim societies are structured against the participation of women as equal to men. The female preachers could have a good education, but they are expected to only address a specific gender of the population. Their participation in the transmission of Islamic knowledge is expected to complement the male clerics’ sermons and are not regarded as “a substitute for, or rival to, male authority.”⁷⁷ As a result, the female preachers in Mombasa can only exist with the consent of the male religious authorities in the Muslim communities.

The female preachers do not interpret this societal arrangement that reinforces customs promoted by conservative *ulama* toward women in the Muslim societies, as oppression. In their radio sermons, the female preachers do not question the social arrangements that put women in a subordinate position. In their silence, these prominent conservative female preachers appear to support the structured social system. Their comments and postures can be seen as authenticating the ethical regulation that puts women in an inferior position on a social and religious level, thereby conforming to the conservative Islamic practice that gives “men excessive control over women.”⁷⁸ They passionately argue for the maintenance of the *status quo*, rejecting emancipation, and as a result their emergence should not be viewed as an attempt to alter the social and ethical system that restricts their activities in the public.

While a public space has been created by the male dominated religious establishment for female preachers on the Muslim radio stations, this recognition is due to the women’s ability to mobilise themselves as teachers in their respective women’s learning circles. Muslim women’s

⁷⁵ Schulz, “Dis/embodying Authority,” 24.

⁷⁶ Schulz, “Evoking Moral Community,” 58-59.

⁷⁷ Kalmbach, “Social and Religious Change in Damascus,” 50.

⁷⁸ Kalmbach, “Social and Religious Change in Damascus,” 55.

participation in *da'wah* activities is relegated to same-sex interaction even when the setting changes for a radio station. The emphasis that the female preachers place on the significance of sexual “decency” is in accordance to the type of moral guidance demanded by the male *ulama*. Women who decline to accept these laid-down constraints are not accepted as legitimate religious authorities or “good” Muslims by the mainstream *ulama*.

Conclusion

The debate on female mediated sermons and the question of who is authorised to publicly speak for Islam have been raised by the introduction of the Muslim radio stations in Kenya. Despite limitations imposed by some conservative *ulama*, new forms of female religious authorities represent a significant development among Kenyan Muslims. Though the Kenyan Muslim communities are generally biased towards women, recent developments have seen their increased public presence in radio programmes as a religious authority, raising their social reputation in society. It is considered appropriate for women to conduct their lectures in a particular speech mode and within certain conditions, whereas male preachers are “free to move and lecture in a variety of public settings” and are “less bound by an etiquette of modest speech.”⁷⁹ The charge of seductiveness against the female preachers is a threat to their integrity as they strive to present themselves as decent religious role models. This denigration implies that a gender-specific conceptualisation of acceptable speech exists among Kenyan Muslims, impeding women’s efforts to contribute in the public communication of religious knowledge. The debate on the acceptability of the female preachers’ radio sermons reflects “processes of negotiation and partial incorporation” as legitimate authorities without altering the conventional means of religious authority.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, though radio sermons contribute in heightening insecurities about the female voice, they also contribute in enhancing the authority of the female Muslim preachers due to their recognition by the radio stations and the general Muslim audience in Kenya. The aversion that the female preachers encounter when sermonising on radio, illustrates the fear of the power of the female voice. Despite the fact that their involvement in offering public sermons is not aimed at amending the

⁷⁹ Schulz, “Dis/embodying Authority,” 32.

⁸⁰ Schulz, “Dis/embodying Authority,” 38.

social and ethical structures, there is no doubt that they have challenged the established category of public religious interpretation. Their radio sermons have demonstrated how the assimilation of media technology affects conventional styles of religious knowledge transmission and engagement in Kenya.

For a continued acceptance to host a radio programme, the female preachers adopt a strategy that entails accepting the boundaries set by the religious media sponsors through the advice of the male *ulama* “vetting board.” A close analysis of the female preachers’ and male clergy’s sermons reveal that they converge on questions related to women’s rights in Muslim communities due to a patriarchal reading of the Qur’an. While there is definitely an ideological convergence between the female and male preachers on the place and status of Muslim women in society, the case of radio preaching demonstrates how the female preachers present an alternative religious authority to the patriarchal social order. However, as a product of patriarchal patronage, the female preachers in the various radio programmes do not exhibit a degree of autonomy of critical thought. Their usage of the radio platform is not aimed at subverting the co-opted social control of Muslim women in society, because their reading of Islamic doctrine does not differ from that of traditional Muslim clerics. This is attributed to the fact that the female preachers concerned are not explicitly progressive feminist religious thinkers or activists, but instead that they comply with the existing structures defined by the male *ulama*. However, with the opportunities of education (both secular and religious), media diversification, and greater consumer choice, this situation could change in future, witnessing a strong feminist religious activism.

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