

Article

Media and the Female Imam

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Received: 30 January 2019; Accepted: 28 February 2019; Published: 5 March 2019



Abstract: Female imams are attractive protagonists in documentaries, books, and news stories. This article investigates the tensions that arise when ritual performance takes place before an audience and how symbolic events such as women-led Friday prayer and identities such as female imams are produced in the intersection of interests between women who want to re-claim Islam and commercial media, which produce narratives that are in demand among media consumers. These productions are compared with women who make similar performances but who for various reasons stay away from media. One of these reasons, the problem of translating meaning from an Islamic context to a non-Islamic mediated context, is explored in depth. Finally, the spread of Sherin Khankan's and Seyran Ates' narratives are analyzed with Henry Jenkins concept *spreadability*. The article is based on field work in the Mariam Mosque (Copenhagen), field observations in the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque (Berlin), and interviews with 14 women who are engaged in nonconformist activities such as delivering the *khutbah* or leading Friday prayer.

Keywords: Islamic feminism; Muslim feminism; female imams; Islam and media; Seyran Ates; Sherin Khankan; spreadability

On 26 August 2016 Saliha Marie Fetteh delivered the *khutbah* while Sherin Khankan led the first women-only Friday prayer in the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen, and less than a year later on 16 June 2017 Seyran Ates delivered the *khutbah* in the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque in Berlin while Ani Zonneveld led the subsequent Friday prayer. These two events in many ways resembled when Amina Wadud led Friday prayer for a mixed gender congregation in New York on 18 March 2005. Both Khankan and Ates received major media coverage, they sparked controversy both locally and in the Middle East, and they became icons within two different streams of Islamic feminism (see below). An important difference, though, is that while the 18 March 2005 was a single event, 26 August 2016 and 16 June 2017 marked the founding of institutions that have since continued their practice. However, Khankan and Ates are not the only women in Scandinavia and the German speaking countries to have claimed the imam title.

The two streams of feminism are not divided over theological questions. Rather, it is a difference in positioning and how they define emancipation. Ates positions herself in opposition to established Muslim communities whereas Khankan tries to position herself as a part of it. This entails that Ates calls out conservatism whereas Khankan relativizes it. Furthermore, Ates essentializes veiling and conservative gender constructions as suppressive to women whereas Khankan acknowledges a variety of gender constructions as being potentially emancipated. That is, Khankan calls a woman emancipated if she is free to live according to her own beliefs whatever they may be. Most recently these two positions have been visible when Ates banned the niqab in her mosque and campaigned for a ban on the hijab in Berlin schools while Khankan argued against the niqab-ban in Denmark ([Ingvorsen 2018](#) and [Menkens 2018](#)).

In Scandinavia, at least four women (Suad Mohamed, Sherin Khankan, Iman Baroudi, and Maryam Trine Skogen) have publicly claimed the imam-title since 2001, and many more have either been given the title or claimed it in local Muslim communities ([Minganti 2012](#), p. 379;

Sorgenfrei 2018, p. 275; Tollersrud 2017). Furthermore, in 2008 a poll from Catinet Research demonstrated that 29% of Danish Muslims were either in favor or much in favor of female imams and a recent mapping project of Danish mosques demonstrated that women holding religious authority in Turkish and Bosnian mosques use this title (Catinet Research 2009, p. 72; Kühle and Larsen 2017, p. 65). Similarly, in Germany at least three women (Rabeya Müller, Halima Krausen, and Seyran Ates) use the imam-title in public and many more have either been given the title or claimed it in local Muslim communities (see below). Women who use the imam-title perform it in different ways; for some it is about religious leadership such as counseling and teaching while for others it is about religious performances such as delivering the khutbah and leading prayer. Interestingly, some women deliver the khutbah and lead Friday prayer without taking the imam title. This is the case with for example Carolina Neumueller who for nearly three years (ending in March 2018) delivered the khutbah and led mixed gender Friday prayer in Bremen (interview 21 June 2018) and Elham Manea who has done the same on individual occasions such as with *Die Offene Moschee Schweiz's* Friday Prayer on 27 May 2016 in *House der Religionen* in Bern (interview 27.06.2018).

In this article, I analyze the relation between Islamic feminist activism and media companies such as book publishers, documentarists, and news media that operate on markets regulated by consumer demands. I argue that media production companies have an interest in framing female religious leadership as an internal struggle against the oppression of Muslim women, because this follows well established logics among media consumers. This entails that it may be difficult for a woman to appear in the media as a religious leader who for example leads Friday prayer without this becoming a statement within ongoing debates about Islam. Furthermore, journalists and media consumers may have difficulty seeing the significance of interfaith marriage between a Muslim woman and non-Muslim men or see the nuances between a pre-khutbah *bayan* and a *khutbah*. In other words, Muslim women's positioning within the Muslim community does not translate well into public debates and this may put them in an antagonistic position. Female religious leaders often prefer a low linguistic frame that is not immediately intelligible to media consumers and their stories therefore remain unreported. Furthermore, female religious leaders who go public are inserted into ongoing discussions on topics such as terrorism, social control, and forced marriage that may not be important or relevant for their personal faith.

The article is based on interviews with fourteen women who are engaged in various kinds of nonconformist prayer leadership. That is, women who do not conform to hegemonic discourses that prohibit women from for example leading mixed gender congregations in prayer, deliver the khutbah, or lead women-only Friday prayer. Some of them have been framed as female imams, but this has mainly happened—or happened for the first time—in relation to a non-Muslim audience. Four of the informants have claimed (or are indifferent about) the imam-title, three have at some point accepted the title temporarily, and seven consistently defy this and many other titles. The latter group tends to be linguistically framed in a variety of ways and their reluctance to accept these titles is an ongoing internal discussion. In order to capture this defiance and/or indifference I have put the imam-title under erasure later in the article. I have interviewed some of the women more than once and all of them come from Scandinavia, Germany, or Switzerland. In addition to this, I have done fieldwork in the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen since its opening in 2016 (and within the Femimam group that preceded it), and I have made six visits to the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque in Berlin between June 2017 and December 2018 while keeping regular contact with two members via texting and email. Three of the Scandinavian female imams mentioned above (Iman Baroudi, Suad Muhamed, and Mariam Trine Skogen) are not part of the 14 interviewees.¹

¹ Mariam Trine Skogen has denounced the imam-title and therefore does not want to participate in the study, and I have neither been able to reach Baroudi or Mohamed. However, in an interview with *Sveriges Radio* (Eng: Radio Sweden) Mohamed explained that she was originally framed as Sweden's first female imam in *Kyrkans Tidning* (a national church journal) in 2001 after which she merely went along with it and used the title. However, she denounced the title after Wadud's

This article first analyzes the tension that may arise when an Islamic ritual is performed before an audience and why some women avoid this. Next, it investigates how Khankan and Ates both became famous female imams among international audiences through media. I use the term female imam because that is what Khankan and Ates are called in these productions and how they have come to self-identify. By using Henry Jenkins concept of spreadability I explain how and why Khankan's announcement of her intentions to open a mosque started to spread in March 2015.

1. Religious Performance in Front of an Audience

In her book *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism—More Than a Prayer* Hammer (2012) analyses Muslim women's biographical literature as speaking-out-literature in which Muslim women re-claim their religion after 9/11. An important reference point in this literature is the 2005 event in New York where Amina Wadud led a mixed gender congregation in Friday prayer. In a European context, this prayer has also become an important reference point, and both Khankan and Ates have taken inspiration from it and utilized it to legitimize their own activism (See for example Ates 2017 and Khankan 2015). As Hammer explains, the 2005 prayer was both "an accident of history, initiated by particular individuals on a particular day" and "the logical culmination of a trajectory of events and debates in the decades before" (Hammer 2012, p. 4). However, without media exposure the 2005 prayer would not have achieved the high symbolic value that it did.

In what Alberto Melucci calls complex societies, "material production is increasingly replaced by the production of signs and social relations" (Melucci 1989, p. 45). Female imams are attractive protagonists in documentaries, books, and news stories, and these commercial products both amplify their message and to some extent fund their activism. The 2005 prayer was according to Hammer and Asra Nomani paid for by the latter's publisher, HarperCollins, who used the event as publicity for Nomani's autobiography *Standing Alone* (Hammer 2012, pp. 32–33; Nomani 2006). The prayer also featured in the documentary *The Mosque in Morgantown* about Nomani's struggle for reform within Islam. These commercial media products are produced in the intersection of interests between women who want to re-claim Islam and commercial media, which produce narratives that are in demand among media consumers. In other words, commercial media amplifies the women's voices and in return, they get valuable narratives that they can commodify.

Abu-Lughod (2013) has argued that consumer demands determine which narratives are selected for publication and that this is one of the primary reasons for the bias towards *pulp nonfiction*; a term coined by Dohra Ahmed to describe the commodification of monolithic representation of Muslim women as suppressed for the Euro-American book market. In this literature, "we are plunged into dystopic worlds of violent abuse, our guides the Muslim girls who have suffered and escaped" (Abu-Lughod 2013, pp. 87–88). The production and reproduction of commercial media products about the 2005 prayer demonstrate that there also is a demand for narratives about Muslim feminists. However, as I will demonstrate later in the article, these narratives are sometimes reproduced as pulp nonfiction.

The intersection described above may cause tension between devotional worship and feminist symbolic activism, which is visible at every level of both activism and the production of media narratives. These categories are not mutually exclusive; however, as soon as an audience is present, worshippers appear to perform for that audience. In this context, audience should be understood broadly; it can be a camera, a journalist, non-Muslim guests etc. In Erving Goffman's terminology, as soon as guests enter the room a *front*- and *backstage* is created, and what takes place on the frontstage is a performance for the guests (Goffman [1959] 1990).

Friday prayer in 2005 because it, according to her, had suddenly taken on a new and much more controversial meaning (Sveriges Radio 2007).

Hammer points at several moments in the 2005 prayer in New York in which she noticed a tension between the religious and the symbolic activist meaning. She for example remarks that Wadud defied sensationalism, instructed congregants to focus on God rather than the cameras, and found it odd to partake in a press conference before a prayer (Hammer 2012, pp. 13–30). The tension became most evident at the completion of the ritual: “Immediately after the prayer the camera followed Nomani as she exclaimed, “We did it!” and greeted and hugged women in the congregation while Wadud can be seen performing an additional individual prayer” (Hammer 2012, p. 30). The *it* in Nomani’s exclamation refers simultaneously to the successful completion of the Friday prayer and the symbolic meaning produced by it. Without the ritual performance, the feminist symbolic meaning would not have been produced and without this there would be nothing to cheer about.

A similar incident played out at the opening of the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque, which employs its own press officer, Marlene Löhr. The mosque, which is located on the fourth floor of a church, was full to the brim of journalists, photographers, and camera people, who sat at the back. While this position is good for covering the khutbah, it did not work for the actual prayer, which they insisted on shooting from the front of the mosque so that worshippers faced their cameras while praying. As a compromise, Löhr arranged with Ates that the photographers and camera people would move to the front of the mosque (thereby standing with their backs against the wall where the *mihrab* would normally be) and take their pictures while the congregation posed in the first up-right standing positions of a *rakah*. This is what was sent into circulation as the symbolic media event, while the actual prayer was performed with the press at the back so that the sanctity of the prayer was respected. The Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque is still open to media, but the access is regulated by Löhr so that the sanctity of the mosque and activities within it are respected.

The extensive and continuous media coverage of the Mariam Mosque after the opening on 26 August 2016 opened up a discussion internally in the group behind the mosque. Many wanted all cameras and journalists out of the mosque because they felt that they were performing rather than worshipping. While Khankan understood their concerns she also found it important to keep the mosque open to journalists because of the potential reach this offered. That is, by being open to media the mosque could reach audiences far beyond Copenhagen. Furthermore, Khankan wanted to engage in the struggle against essentialist claims about Islam being an inherently misogynistic religion. The internal discussions in the Mariam Mosque initially lead to a few compromises but it proved very difficult to separate areas that were open or closed to journalists, so in the summer of 2017, Khankan gave way to ban journalists from attending the Friday prayer. However, they were still welcome on other days.

2. The Making of a Female Imam

While all 14 informants for this study have either delivered a khutbah and/or lead Friday prayer, seven have consequently rejected the imam title either because they feel they do not have proper educational credentials to claim it and/or because they are disinterested or do not find the struggle over titles meaningful. As Carolina Neumueller, who holds a PhD in Islamic studies from Exeter University, explained to me: “these are big words to use” adding “I would never call myself an imam” (interview 21.06.2018). Congregants would sometimes call her imam and she felt honored by this, but it did not lead her to adopt the title. Neumueller delivered the khutbah and subsequently led mixed gender Friday prayer once a month in her InfoPoint Islam in Bremen for two years, and in the beginning of 2017 she changed this to twice a month before she closed the InfoPoint for personal reasons in March 2018. She self-financed the InfoPoint and it could easily have been commodified for publication in commercial media, but as Neumueller explained to me, this would make her initiative stand out even more, and antagonizing the community would be counter-productive to her aim with the initiative. Instead, she tried to reach an audience online by reproducing her khutbahs as videos on YouTube. While YouTube is of course a commercial media, it gives users full control of the production and makes it possible to target small niche markets that are not valuable enough

for media production companies to get involved. This is an interesting approach in that it puts the content of the khutbah in focus, and because she recorded the videos after (and not during) the Friday prayer, what could otherwise be understood as feminist symbolic activism was rendered invisible. While Wadud, Khankan, and Ates have produced powerful symbols that have spread far beyond New York, Copenhagen, and Berlin, the focus of commercial media has been on form rather than content. That is, commercial media has to a great extent focused on their Friday prayers as symbolic events of a struggle against the oppression of women in Islam, as this is the main frame of media coverage.

The reluctance to adopt the imam title is a way of positioning oneself. As Neumueller explained, she does not mind that Muslims address her as imam because this is something that is bestowed. However, to make the claim could be understood as an antagonistic action that places the claimant outside the Islamic community from where she will struggle against the system rather than within it. Many of my informants want to practice their interpretation of Islam while being part of the community and in this context the antagonistic position becomes problematic. It is therefore important to notice that the antagonistic position of the female imam is an inherent part of the narrative told of female imams in media narratives and exposure amplifies the problem. Furthermore, by being portrayed as a Muslim feminist who is empowered and emancipated one runs the risk of delegitimizing other ways of being Muslim that may be just as empowered. In order to create an inclusive space, Neumueller was deliberately low key: “I have always done that [the work in the InfoPoint Islam] pretty much low key. I haven’t done much advertisement on it. I basically thought it important; people should feel comfortable, and it is not important for me to become famous” (interview 21.06.2018).

Halima Krausen has to a great extent been able to position herself inside the community while also holding religious authority; or as Riem Spielhaus puts it: “Whereas the 2005 mixed-gender prayer led by a woman in New York fueled active debate on the legitimacy of such a practice, in Germany Halima Krausen’s visibility as a ‘female *imam*’ within the Muslim community has proved remarkably uncontroversial” (Spielhaus 2011, pp. 437–38). Trained as an Islamic scholar she gradually took over duties from her teacher, Mehdi Razvi, at the Imam Ali Mosque in Hamburg (see Spielhaus 2011 for more details on Krausen’s career). She taught courses on Islam, offered Islamic counseling, wrote fatwas, and settled divorces, and when Razvi retired from his position as imam in 1996, Krausen took over and became the *imam* (as planned approximately five years in advance). I have put the imam title under erasure to illustrate that several of my other informants including Krausen may perform a role that would otherwise be understood as the role of an imam, but they do not actively claim the title and some even reject it. Krausen for example joked with me saying: “it is a title that was imposed on me, so I may just as well use it” after which she deconstructed the title to the point of being so polysemic that the symbolism of making the claim disappeared. Krausen defied any attempt at labeling her faith or imposing a title on her: “You put me in a box, and I will jump right out of it again” and “I avoid using titles” (interview 20.06.2018). When I asked Krausen how the imam title was originally bestowed on her, she explained that Razvi (and others) understood her to be an imam: “Actually, I never used any titles . . . The title was first used by the protestant academy in Hamburg when they needed to announce the speaker and they needed a title—badly—because that is what I practically did. So, I went to my teacher and said: ‘look at this’, and he said: ‘Yes that is what you are’” (interview 20.06.2018). Krausen did not attach any symbolic value to this title emphasizing that since it is not protected; anyone can claim it.

Krausen has led prayer in many different contexts for more than 30 years; initially women-only but later also mixed-gender. However, she only leads mixed gender prayer if there is consensus on this in the congregation. If there is no consensus, she leaves the role to a man, which she has done on occasions. Similarly, Neumueller would offer the role to a man if anyone felt uncomfortable with being led by a woman. For Neumueller this never happened at a Friday prayer, but it happened a few times for other prayers.

With only one exception, my informants have found the imam title personally uncomfortable, insignificant, or problematic because of how the word *imam* changes meaning depending on the context;

in one setting it is a respectful address whereas in another setting it is a claim to religious authority or maybe even a challenge to the structure of religious authority. One (anonymous) informant, who just like Krausen was entitled as *female imam* in a conference program, wanted to avoid any kind of categorization. Although she did not mind others calling her imam, it was important for her that it was not framed with high symbolic meaning and thereby as a challenge that would put her into an antagonistic position. She found it important that women deliver the khutbah and lead Friday prayer, but she preferred not to use terms like mosque and female imam to describe it. In other words, she just wanted to practice her religion without simultaneously making it a feministic struggle. In the Mariam Mosque three of the *imams* had similar concerns; they strongly defied titles even though there was a pressure on them to adopt some form of title. This was important in contexts where a common name for the religious leadership of the mosque was needed. Furthermore, Khankan wanted to have a flat structure in the leadership of the mosque, which required either that she framed herself with a lower title or that the rest of the *imams* framed themselves with a higher title. The continuous discussions over this produced several interesting compromises such as *fremtidig imam* (Eng: future imam) and *in-the-process-of-becoming-imam*. These titles include the symbolic claim that women can be imams while not making claims about being an imam yet.

3. Media and the Making of Female Imams

Neither Khankan nor Ates wanted initially to claim the imam title. However, their engagement with media entailed a more rigid linguistic fixation and they both became famous imams propelled by their interaction with media. Prior to the opening of the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque, Ates wrote *Salam, Frau Imamin—Wie Ich in Berlin eine Liberale Moschee Gründete* (Eng: Salam Mrs. Imam—How I Founded a Liberal Mosque in Berlin). In this, she explains that:

The decision to let myself educate as a female imam (Ger: *Imamin*) is not something that happened overnight; it developed slowly together with the idea to found a liberal mosque. First, I wanted to find a place and bring people together, so that they could get to know one another; next a female imam and an imam had to be found. These should lead prayer in tandem (Ger: *Doppelspitze*) at the founding of the mosque. I still stick to this plan. I do not want to do it myself, but I will take care of other things. I primarily see myself as part of the believers behind an imam or a female imam. Yet, I attend religious education so that I will be able to deliver the Friday sermon from time to time. However, not merely for this reason but also because I want to get to know Islam better and would like to dive deeper into my faith. (my translation from German, Ates 2017, p. 205)

The book was published on the day of the first Friday prayer in the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque, but by then Ates had become an imam in the media. Ates originally presented herself as a *Gesellschafterin* (Eng: a legal term for being a partner in something) and *Gründerin* (Eng: founder), however, this entailed that the mosque had no imam and so Ates became the imam. When I asked Ates about this in January 2017, she was still reluctant to adopt the title because she felt it implied a religious education that she did not have. On the other hand, she explained that the title had proven to be important symbolically and that she used it in its meaning of being the leader of the mosque while adding that the greeting *Salam Frau imamin* in the title of her book was originally intended as a reference to the advent of female imams in general (interview 18.01.2018). Neither did Elham Manea, who was one of the two *imams* who led the opening tandem Friday prayer on 16 June 2017, want to claim the imam title, but she hoped women with the right qualifications would do so in the future (interview 27.06.2018). Manea took the title *Gesellschafterin* and *Mitgründerin* (co-founder).

As Ates explains in the quote, her plan to found a mosque was many years in the making. In 2009 she tried to found a mosque similar to the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque, but the project failed because the group behind the project split before the mosque was founded (interview 18.01.2018). Similarly, it took approximately 15 years from Khankan's original discourse on female imams to the founding of

the Mariam Mosque, and it was only when no other women wanted to step forward that Khankan laid claim to the imam title. In the limited space I have available, I cannot do justice to the processes that led to the founding of the Mariam Mosque and the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque. The latter was a carefully planned process whereas the Mariam Mosque was founded primarily on an idea that became institutionalized 1½ year after Khankan had appeared as an imam in the media for the first time. I will give a more detailed account of Khankan's founding of the Mariam Mosque to demonstrate the role media can have in the making of a female imam.

Preceding the founding of the Mariam Mosque, Khankan developed the idea of female imams and published several versions of her discourse in books and articles. Khankan's first mention of female imams was a response to a question on the internet-forum *religion.dk* in December 2001. A few weeks later, the owner of the forum, *Kristeligt Dagblad* (a Danish newspaper), published the answer as an article by Khankan titled *Kvindelige Imamer Ønskes* (Eng: Female imams wanted) in its debate section. In the article, Khankan argues that female imams should be allowed to deliver the khutbah and lead prayer for women-only congregations (Khankan 2002). A similar article by Aminah Tønnsen titled *Hvorfor ikke kvindelige imamer* (Eng: Why not female imams) can be found in *Weekendavisen* (Tønnsen 2003). Neither of these articles contained more than personal opinion and this may be the reason why they did not spread.

Over the subsequent 13 years Khankan developed her discourse on female imams in several different directions. This was a process with many dead ends, several reformulations, and adaptations to new contexts. In 2006 she for example published *Islam og Forsoning* (Eng: Islam and Atonement) in which she adopted a less significant linguistic frame by calling the female imam a khatibah. It is common for women who give religious lectures to call themselves khatibah and the title therefore implies something legitimate. Khankan, furthermore, suggested some ritual amendments that would accommodate for religious conservative sentiments such as having the khatibah lead the women and an imam lead the men (Khankan 2006).

The development towards the Mariam Mosque came in the late summer of 2014, when Khankan made a series of life changing decisions. She enrolled as a student in cognitive therapy, started divorce-proceedings to end her 11-years of marriage, founded *Exitcirlen*, which is an NGO that helps women out of abusive relationships, and reached out to women who could potentially become female imams. At this stage Khankan did not want to become an imam herself; she wanted to frequent a mosque with female imams. However, no woman was willing to take this position upon her request—not even Tønnsen (mentioned above), who explained that she was exhausted after years of struggle both against patriarchal understandings of Islam and monolithic conceptions of Islam in Danish media.

By a complete coincidence, Khankan met Saliha Marie Fetteh, who is a well-respected convert with a master's degree in Arabic from Baghdad University, in Copenhagen Airport on 12 November 2014 while boarding a plane bound for Istanbul where they were attending the same conference. Khankan introduced herself to Fetteh and before landing in Istanbul Fetteh had agreed to deliver the khutbah and lead Friday prayer. She refused to call herself an imam though. Khankan was scheduled to give a talk on Islam and secularism at the conference and a few minutes overtime, she announced the founding of a committee that intended to found a house of worship for all three Abrahamic religions:

Male imams have to promote and allow female imams to give khutbah in mosques all over Europe and in the rest of the world. I have recently established a committee in Copenhagen that consists of female imams and their supporters and in the end, I have a vision of a united place of prayer for Muslims and Christians and Jews. So my last point . . . You can read it within yourself and thank you so much for your time. (Transcribed from a recording of Khankan's talk)

The story was picked up by *Weekendavisen*, which interviewed Khankan and published an article that, although it was about peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians, briefly mentioned that

Khankan was paving the way for female imams (Bramming 2014). In other words, mere intentions were not enough to make news. It is interesting to note that Khankan's discourse on female imams in Istanbul focused on uniting the Abrahamic religions in a single house of worship.

On 7 February 2015, Khankan was invited to take part in a TV-program to comment on the attack on Charlie Hebdo a month earlier in Paris. In the pre-interview for the program, Khankan mentioned she had concrete plans to open a mosque with female imams, and the producers ended up setting aside almost a quarter of the one-hour program for a discussion of her plans. On air Khankan explained that she intended to open a mosque with female imams in the summer 2015 and that she was currently looking for a venue. Even though this happened on one of Denmark's biggest TV stations (DR2), the story did not spread.

Khankan got her breakthrough on 3 March 2015 when she appeared on the front page of *Information* (Danish newspaper) with the title *Danmarks Næste Imam?* (Eng: Denmark's Next Imam?). Two days later Denmark's largest newspaper, *Politiken*, published an op-ed in which Khankan explained that the mosque would open in August 2015 (Khankan 2015). Khankan framed her plans with a high symbolic meaning and announced that Femimam—as it was called back then—would have well educated imams leading mixed-gender prayer. The story spread rapidly within both Danish and international media, and Khankan was soon flooded with requests for interviews, panels, lectures, documentaries et cetera. Within a month, she had signed contracts with two TV-production companies that were going to document the journey towards the opening of Scandinavia's first women's mosque and recording started on 24 April 2015.

Fetteh (and others) were a bit surprised by Khankan's op-ed and objected to mixed-gender prayer, which meant that the mosque was re-announced towards the end of the month as a women-only mosque (Johansen 2015). The term *imam*, which Khankan had used in the title ended up falling back on herself as Fetteh objected to it. The immense attention from media created a narrative around Khankan and committed her to a trajectory towards opening a women-led mosque. The first documentary about the forthcoming opening of the Mariam Mosque aired on 5 June 2015 as a part of the celebration of the 100-years jubilee of universal suffrage in Denmark, and shortly after, Khankan performed her first Islamic marriage. Interestingly, Fetteh adopted the imam title for a short while during the immense media exposure at the opening of the mosque 1½ year later when she realized that not having a title or using the khatibah-title were meaningless frames in the media. Furthermore, she was supposed to both deliver the khutbah and lead the subsequent prayer, so khatibah was not a good description of her performance. However, in the hours before the opening, plans were changed so that Fetteh delivered the khutbah and Khankan led the Friday prayer. A year later Fetteh publicly denounced the title and left the Mariam Mosque in an undramatic and peaceful way (Hansen 2017).

As mentioned, it took 1½ year before the mosque actually opened on 26 August 2016, but by then Khankan was a big name internationally and the first Friday prayer received immense media coverage. The commercial and symbolic value that Khankan's narrative accumulated in the time after this prayer is evident from for example her appearance on the BBC list of 100 inspirational and influential women 2016 and her place as number 197 on the Global Influence Toplist 2018. Soon after the first Friday prayer, Khankan signed a book contract with the French publisher, Stock, and therefore her biography was published in French, English, and Finish (Khankan 2017, 2018a, 2018b)—but not in Danish. This led to even more exposure and prestigious appearances such as tea with the French president Emmanuel Macron and several awards, the latest being the 2018 Global Hope Award. These are merely selected examples of the value that had been generated in the intersection between Khankan's interest in maximizing her impact and commercial media's (and others') interest in her narrative. The maximization of impact is visible from for example Khakan's two TEDx talks (Münster 02.11.2018 and Lausanne 05.12.2018) and her appearance on highly rated TV-programs such as HardTalk (09.10.2018) and niche shows such as al-Shabab talk (06.09.2016). Events such as these focus on what Khankan is saying while her position as the female imam of the Mariam Mosque, which

is otherwise in focus, becomes the platform she stands on (or the reason she is invited to talk in the first place).

Interestingly, the symbolic value of both Khankan and Ates is not based on the number of congregants in their mosques. Neither have made claims about being leaders of mosques with high attendance. It is rather the demand for these kinds of narratives and their spreadability that have generated the value. It should also be noted that both Khankan and Ates has many years of experience with media prior to the founding of their respective mosques.

4. Spreadability and the Narrative of the Female Imam

So far, I have analyzed media as producers of narratives (with commercial value) that are broadcasted to passive audiences. However, narratives are much more than mere products and they spread in much messier ways than the words *broadcast* suggests. The spread of a news story is key to making public female imams such as Wadud, Khankan, and Ates. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green coined the term *spreadability* to more accurately describe how narratives spread in the information infrastructure:

Spreadability assumes a world where mass content is continually repositioned as it enters different niche communities. When material is produced according to a one-size-fits-all model, it imperfectly fits the needs of any given audience. Instead, audience members have to retrofit it to better serve their interests. As material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms. (Jenkins et al. 2013, p. 27)

A narrative's spreadability depends on a series of variables such as its malleability (its potential to be developed into meaningful symbols in different contexts). If, for example, a narrative can be used to further a cause in another context than its original context, then it will spread. Three examples will demonstrate this.

On 13 February 2016 (during the US-primaries), Breitbart published the story: *Denmark Will Build Secret Women's only Mosques to Protect Worshippers from Radical Islamists*. The article seems to have been written to support Donald Trump's narrative about Islamic extremism, and Khankan is cast as the protagonist in a pulp nonfiction story. Although, Khankan is not claimed to have denounced Islam, she is presented as someone who escaped and needs the Danish state to save her from radical Islamists: "The first female only mosque has already been built in the Danish capital of Copenhagen. This factor has led to the mosque being run in secret, since radical Islamists who have little respect for the opinions or rights of women threaten the existence of the project" (Lane and Tomlinson 2016). This is a reproduction of Khankan as our guide, "who have suffered and escaped" (Abu-Lughod 2013, p. 87).

In a Danish context it is unimaginable that the state would pay for the construction of a mosque; be it a women's mosque or otherwise. Somewhat ironically three Danish MP's actually tried to cut the public funding of Khankan's NGO *Exitcirklen* (mentioned above) based on the claim that she endorsed flogging and sharia law (Borre 2017). This story repeatedly made headlines in Denmark throughout the fall of 2017 and Khankan ended up suing the three MPs for libel.

While Khankan was framed as someone who endorse stoning and flogging by the three Danish MPs (and others), the story of the female imam fighting patriarchy spread in France. This started with a high interest from French media at the opening of the mosque, it reached higher levels when Khankan's biography was released, and it culminated with Khankan having tea with the French president, Emmanuel Macron, in the Élysée Palace. Danish media took no real interest in this meeting; the story primarily spread via social media with a picture of Khankan sitting in a chair and Macron standing behind her. Only a single Danish reporter showed up to interview Khankan outside the palace and Khankan's answer to her first question: "what are your thoughts on being invited as a Danish imam to speak with a president?" demonstrates the discrepancy between narratives:

It is quite paradoxical, as I am just now suing three major Danish politicians for libel because they have accused me of being a radical Islamist It is paradoxical that I am looked upon as a representative of progressive Islam in France, whereas in Denmark I have to fight for not being looked upon as the opposite. (transcribed and translated from Danish)

The three narratives mentioned above are but examples of the many—possibly hundreds of—narratives in circulation, and Khankan have several times tried to squash the most damaging narratives in Europe, America, and the Middle East. That is, even though the interview demonstrates a paradox, the underlying tension between narratives is not an isolated case.

None of the narratives above are completely made up; they all come from somewhere. The Breitbart story originates in an interview with Khankan published in *Politiken* (Danish newspaper) two days earlier in which she announced that Femimam had found a venue and were now planning the first Friday prayer. Khankan was unwilling to disclose the address (because the donor wanted to postpone this announcement) but the journalist interpreted this as fear of “reactionary Muslim communities” (Giese 2016). Furthermore, Lane and Tomlinson at Breitbart made a series of erroneous assumptions about for example the mosque being state funded and it being a purpose-built mosque when in reality it was a private donor who gave Femimam permission to book timeslots in a multipurpose room in an apartment he owned in downtown Copenhagen.

Similarly, the story about Khankan being a radical Islamist originated in a dispute that started 15 years earlier and had been ongoing. Back then, Khankan and Naser Khader (one of the three MPs) were members of the same political party and stood on either side in a vote on condemnation of sharia in relation to a story about a Nigerian woman who had been convicted of adultery and therefore faced stoning. While Khader thought it important to vote for a condemnation of sharia in toto, Khankan found it important that only stoning was condemned (Thobo-Carlsen 2002). More than anything else, this was a discussion of what sharia is, but it became the end of Khankan’s political career.

The final story with Khankan having tea with Emmanuel Macron played into domestic politics in France where Macron associated himself with a progressive Muslim, who had received a lot of positive exposure. However, Macron was soon criticized for having met with Khankan due to an op-ed Khankan had written in 2014 in which she, based on Israel’s recent bombings of Gaza, called for a discussion of whether the country in reality was a terror-state (Khankan 2014).

The three narratives demonstrate that Khankan’s narrative spread by being inserted into ongoing conversations such as the US-primaries and French domestic politics, and this is even more evident in the Danish context where Khankan’s narrative started to spread after a terror attack. This is also the explanation of why Khankan’s narrative started to spread in the beginning of March rather than after her announcement on television on 7 February 2015 (mentioned above). The content of Khankan’s announcement on these two occasions was more or less the same; she was going to found a mosque with female imams in the summer of 2015. The framing was also more or less the same; on *Muslim voices* (7 February), Khankan and other Muslims were in the studio to respond to or reclaim their religion after the Charlie Hebdo terror attack. Eight days later on 15 February, Copenhagen also experienced a terrorist attack in which a young man who had pledged allegiance to Islamic State shot two people, one of them being a guard outside the synagogue in Copenhagen. This story dominated Danish news for more than a month with flowers being placed outside the synagogue, memorial ceremonies, demonstrations, and continuous debates on Islam in the media. There was a strong demand for Muslims to respond to this act of terrorism and this sparked a series of initiatives; one being a group that organized a peace ring on 14 March consisting of a chain of approximately 1000 people holding hands forming a human shield around the synagogue where the guard had been killed. Afterwards this group founded MINO-Denmark which today is the biggest minority organization in Denmark. It was in this context, with a high demand for counter-narratives and pressure on Muslims to reform and modernize Islam, that the Mariam Mosque became a big news story in Denmark.

Another important variable was that Khankan’s announcement on 7 February did not contain enough information for a story and one would have to listen through the interview and transcribe

quotes if one wanted something for just a short story. *Muslim voices* was not a regular show with a social media channel and the TV-station did therefore not post a short clip with Khankan's announcement for circulation, nor did they publish it as a written story on their web-pages. In other words, the form of the story (a TV-interview with no spreadable short format) was not spreadable and its location in the information infrastructure (in a digital archive) was far removed from circulation. This is very different from the beginning of March where Khankan's story spread rapidly. On 2 March 2015 the News Agency, Ritzau, offered a quote story with three quotes by Khankan and a few text pieces explaining the context. This was the day before the Khankan appeared on the front page on *Information* with the title *Denmark's next imam?*

The quote story from Ritzau was brought in two of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation's radio channels (Radio P1 and P3) morning news broadcast, and this was followed up by an article on their webpage, which—just like the story in *Information*—had an easily spreadable form. Audiences could for example insert these two pieces into their online debates on Islam, which due to the terrorist attack was on everyone's lips. Already in the evening the story entered the TV-stream where a prominent imam, Fatih Alev, was confronted with the front page of *Information* as part of an interview on a renowned in-depth program called *Deadline*. The terror-attack had put hard pressure on Muslim leaders to reform and modernize Islam, and towards the end of the interview the journalist presented the front page with the picture of Khankan and asks whether Alev could imagine the introduction of female imams as a part of a modernization of Islam. That is, Khankan's announcement was inserted into the hottest debate of the month where Muslim leaders were measured up against her. The next day, one of the quotes from Ritzau appeared in *Politiken*'s debate section as the quote of the day written in large on the middle of a spread with a picture of Khankan. A day later again, Khankan's op-ed appeared in *Politiken* with a reference on the front page, and a day later again, *Information* followed up with an editorial piece on page two and an article in which two scholars were commenting on the story (Piil 2015a, 2015b). This is the end of the Ritzau trail; however, by then Khankan's announcement was a significant part of the debate between journalists, commentators, Muslim leaders et cetera. This rose to an even higher level when Khankan announced on 17 March that Friday prayer in the mosque would be for women-only. Already on the same day, a right wing commentator, Søren Hviid Pedersen, accused Khankan of endorsing sharia law and having participated in a demonstration organized by Hizb ut-Tahrir (Pedersen 2015). Khankan also experienced a pushback from the Muslim community and this started another spiral of debate. However, by then Khankan had become an imam and Muslims started to request her ritual performance of marriages (as mentioned above, Khankan married the first couple only a few months later in the summer of 2015).

5. The Linguistic Frame of Islamic Feminism and Exposure

In the *Deadline* interview mentioned above, Khankan was framed in an antagonistic position and her announcement was used to put pressure on the existing Muslim community. It is difficult—and in some contexts impossible—to avoid the antagonistic position while participating in public debates as a female imam because positioning within an Islamic context does not translate well into public debates. Journalists and other audiences for example have difficulty seeing the symbolic difference between a khatibah who delivers a pre-khutbah bayan and subsequently leads a *salat al-zuhr* for only women and a female imam who delivers a khutbah and leads *salat al-jumu'ah*. The observable difference is merely two rakah, however, the two events communicate very different intentions and consequently reflect different positions. A religious performance with more complex and often lower symbolic frames is in public debates referred to with high linguistic frames because these are the only available concepts in public discourse. Women's Mosque of America for example consequently call their speakers khatibah (who choose to deliver either a khutbah or a pre-khutbah bayan), but they are referred to as imams delivering Friday sermons in public debates. Similarly, Danish media did not see the significance when Khankan in March 2017 announced that she performs interfaith marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. For many Muslims this was more significant than the women-only

Friday prayer service and it was one of the reasons Fetteh left the Mariam Mosque while several of the other imams were critical of the practice (see above).

All of the anonymous informants for this study and several of the non-anonymous informants defy the antagonistic position. Furthermore, many prefer a low linguistic frame that is not immediately intelligible for non-Muslim audiences. This entails that their stories are only valuable within an insignificant part of the media-market and they therefore remain unreported. In other words, there has to be a story for the media to take an interest and this ultimately depends on a market regulated by demand. Female imams do not occupy a secluded space within the public debate; they are inserted into ongoing discussions on terrorism, social control, LGBTQ+, forced marriage, and other topics that may not be important or relevant for their personal faith. Furthermore, they may be expected to be as progressive as the most progressive parts of society.

Women and mosques that go into public debates have to produce meaningful and valuable symbols in order to come across to the mainly non-Muslim audience in Europe and America. In *The Mosque in Morgantown* Nomani is for example seen posting 99 theses on the door of her hometown mosque after having explained the story about Martin Luther. Likewise, she has framed her demands for reform in *The Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Bedroom* and *The Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Mosque*. Similarly, Khankan framed the opening of the Mariam Mosque as the Islamic pendant to the first female priests being ordained in the Danish state church in 1948, and the imam praying in tandem with Elham Manea at the opening of the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque, Abdel-Hakim Ourghi, posted 40 theses on the door of a traditional mosque in Berlin, which gave significant publicity for his latest book *Reform des Islams: 40 Thesen* (Eng: Reform of Islam: 40 Theses) (Ourghi 2017; Haak 2017).

6. Conclusions

Female imams are attractive protagonists in documentaries, books, and news stories. They are produced in the intersection of interests between women who want to re-claim Islam and commercial media, which produce narratives that are in demand among media consumers. This entails that there is little (if any) connection between the size of congregations and the amount of media exposure. Furthermore, the focus on narratives entails a selection process where only narratives with high linguistic frames that are meaningful to media consumers are selected for publication. Once a narrative is in circulation it is inserted into ongoing debates where it is utilized to serve different interests; some of which may be contrary to the standpoints of the imam herself. However, the symbolic value that exposure generates can also provide a platform for female imams to reach both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences far beyond their mosques.

Many women, who are engaged in similar ritual performances as the mediatized female imams, stay away from media due to concerns about framing. Media engagement entails a translation from the Islamic context into the much more constrained symbolic space of public media, and the insertion into ongoing discussions may entail framing in an antagonistic position that is counter-productive to work “on the ground”. Furthermore, having journalists and cameras present may create a tension between devotional worship and feminist symbolic activism that the women are not interested in.

Funding: This research was funded by Lund University.

Acknowledgments: To help me select interviewees I received much support from Ahmed Krausen, who set up four of the interviews and accompanied me on my first journey to Germany. Krausen is a photographer specialized in European mosque-photography and the brother of the Hamburg based female imam Halima Krausen.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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