Irreligiosity and Belonging

Reflections on an Iranian Dutch Dance Performance

Roodsaz, A.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
From 11 to 13 October 2017, the international research conference *Religious Minorities’ Claims of Difference and Sameness in the Politics of Belonging* was hosted by the Department of Psychology and Religious Studies at Utrecht University. The aim of this conference was to explore how perceptions of specific religious minorities feed into the ways in which these minorities and/or their religion are perceived. In a series of blog posts, different conference participants write about this topic. In this blog post, Dr. Rahil Roodsaz explores the correlation between ‘whiteness’ and ‘irreligiosity’ in the Netherlands.
Irreligiosity and Belonging: Reflections on an Iranian Dutch Dance Performance

Author: Rahil Roodsaz, Postdoctoral Researcher in Cultural Anthropology at Radboud U

In July 2011, the famous Iranian-American pop-singer, Faramarz Asef, was in the city of Nijmegen for an annual summer festivity. Before the concert started, he captured the kind of gathering and celebration that, of course, we would rather have in Iran than in the Netherlands. “Maybe someday, after we have gotten rid of this religious dictatorship, we will actually have exactly that.” Capturing exilic sentiments among especially the first generation of Dutch immigrants, his statements were received by cheers and applauds from the crowd. The previous years, a crowd of approximately 500 people of Iranian descent from various cities attended the event. During this two hours’ festive program, men and women from different social categories would dance, sing and drink together. Dolled up women, wearing sleeveless dresses and high heels joined men with well-tailored suits or shirts tightly fitting their body and fashionable hairstyles. Combined with the loud westernized pop music produced in Los Angeles, this performance would catch the attention of many bystanders.

As an observer, which I was doing as part of my PhD research, I had to answer bystanders’ questions about this group’s background. To quote a curious middle-aged lady: “Where do these people come from? Iran? Really? I thought they might be Italian that…”

‘Where do you come from?’ appears to be a typical question for non-white people (Ahmed 2017, 117). According to Sara Ahmed (2017, 117), such questions often work as ‘asser questions are stopped, a right to stop you is asserted. In being assertive, such speech acts questionable, as someone who can be questioned, as someone who should be willing to question. A body can become a question mark.” In case of the Iranian Dutch dance performance, the bystander stops to pose this question, which suggests curiosity and a sense of place-ness associated with what he observes. Although the Iranian Dutch dance was surrounded by other ‘ethnic’ performances, as put by the organizer, such as Arabic belly dancing and different kinds of ‘exotic’ food trucks, the Iranian western pop and the entire dance performance, rather than ‘ethnic’ or ‘exotic’, conveyed a certain cultural identity and sense of belonging.
whiteness as also hinted at by the bystander’s association of what he saw with the very question of whether they are Italian as posed by the bystander shows the question of whether they are Italian as posed by the bystander shows the question of whether they are Italian as posed by the bystander shows the question of whether they are Italian as posed by the bystander shows their position as either white or non-white. As Sara Ahmed poses in her analysis of the stranger’ (Ahmed 2017, 117), the Iranian Dutch partially white and partially non-white appearance is inconsistent with the expectation of the bystander of what or who dance scene, the Iranian Dutch are neither entirely the ethnic or exotic ‘other’, white ‘us’. Their performance looks too white to be seen as part of the former and by the bystander as ‘Italian’ convey, yet being located in the ‘ethnic’ corner of their not entirely white appearance do not allow for their self-evident categorization.

The Iranian American sociologist Neda Maghbouleh (2017, 170) argues, “In an era of Terror, a racialized master category governs and links Arab, Middle-Eastern, Middle-American, Middle-Asian Americans, despite [...] internal diversity.” In the context of Western European culture, the racialized master category seems to operate as suggested by the interchangeability of the terms ‘Muslim’, ‘Middle-Eastern’, ‘immigrant’ and ‘refugee’ in articulating anxieties about ‘integration’ in western societies. Underlying the questionability of the whiteness of the Iranian Dutch appearance during their dance performance is an anxiety about the difference between non-white Middle-Eastern bodies and Islam in the Dutch context. In the ‘integration’ discourse, these bodies are connected to each other as part of a larger category associated with ethnic, religious and cultural difference as opposed to the secular category of Dutchness. Nevertheless, in case of the Iranian Dutch the bystander’s association of what he saw with the Italian simultaneously points at the fluidity of and possibilities between the categories of ‘white’ and ‘non-white’.

The approximately 35,000 Iranian Dutch form a minority group with an Islamic majority of whom have come to the Netherlands as political refugees in the past decades. Due to their past and sometimes current political activities against the Iran, their relationship with religion can be described as strained. Some of their leftist background and many associate religion, Islam in particular, with an opposition (Roodsaz 2015). Within the community, being openly religious might be seen as alliance with the Iranian authorities and provoke suspicion (Roodsaz 2015; Ghomi, 2015).
Moreover, previous studies have pointed at the relative absence of organized religion (Ghorashi 2001) and a marginalized religious identity within this group. Participation in the job market, a high level of education and a tendency to live as Dutch have been reported among this group as signs of their relatively successful integration into Dutch society (CBS 2016). Furthermore, expressing a critical view on Islam in public Dutch media by some of the well-known Iranian Dutch, such as the law professor, adds to this group’s reputation as secular.

Although these qualifications bring them closer to being included into the white category of Dutchness, in other contexts the Iranian Dutch are confronted with political anxieties around a nuclear Islamic Iran have, for instance, informed a ban in 2007 on receiving university education in the fields related to ‘sensitive nuclear technology’ for Iranians in the Netherlands. This decision was met with protests in the Iranian Dutch community and shows the lack of steadiness of the Iranian Dutch ‘safe’ position as part of the culturally and secular Dutchness based on socio-economic achievements and anti-religious ideas.

Liberal ideas about sexuality and gender are perceived as an important vehicle in modern identity and belonging to Dutch society among the Iranian Dutch, as I informed in my PhD-thesis. One of the most important characteristics of this liberal attitude is the rejection of religious authority over issues of sexuality and gender. This rejection, for instance, allows the opportunities in a diasporic context to gain sexual and romantic experience which Iranian-Dutch parents imagine their children growing up in the Netherlands to cohabit with a potential partner before committing to a married life, which they perceive as the problematic treatment of mainly women, gay and lesbian issues of sexuality and gender, in particular homosexuality, are seen as a matter that are protected and respected in the Netherlands as a secular society, and are perceived as the problematic treatment of mainly women, gays and lesbians. Embracing a liberal attitude towards sexuality and gender...
rhetorical move to position the self outside a religious past and within a secular rejection of religion ‘irreligiosity’, as part of an attempt to claim a modern self of sexuality and gender.

Such constructions of belonging need to be seen as embedded within a larger discourse of integration of (Islamic) minority groups in the Netherlands. As scrutinized by various authors (Dudink 2017; Bracke 2012; Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens 2010), within the progressive Dutch nation as opposed to backward immigrant others is imagined often based on notions of gender and sexuality. According to its popular rhetoric which immigrants manage to appropriate a liberal attitude towards sexuality as an instance with regard to issues of sexual diversity and gender equality, would revolve around the concept of ‘integration’ into Dutch society. The Dutch nation is here assumed and reproduced as secular and progressive and sexuality and gender are employed as the means to integration. Within this discursive field, minority groups with an Islamic background, such as Iranian Dutch, engage in constructions of belonging through negotiating, appropriating and sometimes rejecting expected ethnic and religious identities and positionalities.

Given the framing of the dance event as an illustration of how one would prefer party in an Iran liberated from Islamic dictatorship, as the Iranian American art the audience seems to underline, together with the previously outlined popular sentiments among the Iranian Dutch expressed in relation to issues of sexuality propose to consider their dancing bodies as constitutive of a move from religion to secularity in a Middle-Eastern, Muslim and non-white diasporic setting. They reject Islam as one of the expected categories of otherness in accordance with another expected category of difference, namely being ‘exotic’.

The Iranians’ dancing performance can be seen as an effort to embrace irreligiosity which they overstep the white/non-white racial boundary in the Dutch context. Middle-Eastern, Muslim and non-white are seen as interchangeable. However, ‘pass through’ as either entirely white or non-white, given the curious and surprising reaction from the bystanders about their background in a space where only ‘exotic’ irreligious was expected. If being unmarked, normalized and naturalized can be taken as a sign...
requirement for certain bodies to explain one’s claim to irreligiosity discloses a inclusion in whiteness. This allows us to see the racial boundaries of the secular flexibility and fragility of those boundaries, allowing identities and bodies to be out of whiteness (Maghbouleh 2017). Nevertheless, this incomplete inclusion is that it serves as the very condition for the Iranian Dutch to act ‘unexpectedly’ a enabling them to craft an identity as a racial insider through irreligiosity, howeve incomplete. The Iranian Dutch’ dance performance offers an opportunity to bec visible by not conforming to an expected appearance, a visibility that indicates a between whiteness and non-whiteness and thus carries possibilities of transgre

Further reading


