

Explanation is Not the Point: Domestic Work, Islamic *Dawa* and Becoming Muslim in Kuwait

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Over the past two decades, tens of thousands of migrant domestic workers in Kuwait have developed new-found ‘Islamic piety’.¹ Occurring in a much maligned and understudied region—the Arabian Peninsula—this widespread phenomenon has either been elided, cynically dismissed or the motivations for these conversions and their sociohistorical conditions of possibility assumed. Domestic workers’ own articulations focus on ‘house talk’ and suggest a shift in analytic focus, with an emphasis on everyday relationships and activities within households as generative of their new-found Islamic piety. Domestic workers experience becoming Muslim not as a radical break from their previous relationships and religious practices, but as a gradual reworking of them. The domestic workers’ expression of their new-found Islamic faith points to the household as a space of confluence between Islamic ethical practice and the affective and immaterial labour entailed by domestic work, as well as between global Islam and the feminisation of transnational labour migration that marks our contemporary world.

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On a scalding July day in 2007, Sara and I were crossing the courtyard, making our way to the rooms in the servants’ quarters she and her husband shared. We were quieter than usual. The finality of this, our last meeting, loomed large. After over 20 years of living in Kuwait, she and her husband, whom she had recently married, were returning to her village in southern India to tend to her business and build a mosque. My fieldwork drawing to a close, I was leaving Kuwait in a couple of days. Once we

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were comfortably settled in her sitting room, she asked me a question I suspect she had long been contemplating:

Attiya, I still don't understand. *Yeh beit-ki baat*² [this house talk]; what is its use, its importance? Those people who will see your report, what do they care about this? I am a practising Muslim, yes, but my life is . . . well . . . pretty boring. Tell them about the life of the Prophet . . . that would be better. . .

Sara's comment prompts the central issue I address in this paper. Over the course of conducting fieldwork in Kuwait and Nepal, many of my interlocutors, women like Sara, south Asian migrant domestic workers living and working in Kuwait, discussed with me their new-found Islamic piety (what some may call conversion) in terms of their daily activities and intimate relationships within the household—a conversation that Sara called 'house talk'.

When I first began meeting with Sara, Mariam, Rahman and other domestic workers, I often overlooked these conversions. They told me tales of seemingly simple mundane matters: of work and gossip within Kuwaiti households, of financial and family matters back home and of everyday Islamic practice. I waited for the unexpected, the hidden, the eventful, the dramatic as these related to their adoption of Islamic precepts and practices. I was watchful for any word, any gesture hinting at an employer who may practise Islam in an exemplary or coercive manner, or hinting at a life-changing encounter with a Muslim *daiyat*³ or something more. Few such tales or hints were forthcoming. I was perplexed. I was also a little disbelieving. Domestic workers' articulations of their new-found piety contrasted with how others in Kuwait perceived and depicted them.

Rather than focusing on reasons or explanations—on *why* they were 'converting to Islam', a question others in Kuwait were preoccupied with—my interlocutors were intent on the question of *what* their 'becoming Muslim' entailed and how their new-found piety were developing through the Kuwaiti households within which they lived and worked.⁴ To my interlocutors, explanations for why they were converting to Islam were not the point. The reasons for their new-found piety were self-evident: they had come to appreciate the truths of Islamic living and belief, an appreciation that developed through their experiences of migration to Kuwait, the orchestration of which they ultimately attributed to God's will. Of more concern to them, the focus of their *baat* or discussions with me, was on their *beit*: households in Kuwait where they lived and worked, spaces where they became attuned to and began to adopt Islam, as well as their households in their countries of origin, spaces in which their roles and relationships were being reshaped through their new-found religious beliefs and practices. Many described this process as a gradual one. Far from an abrupt rejection or transformation of their previous religious traditions and lives, these women experienced becoming Muslim as processual, characterised by a gradual re-engagement and reworking of their lives through Islam, a process in which differences between Islam and their previous religious traditions were not necessarily clear.

Limits of 'Conversion'

Domestic workers' articulations of their new-found Islamic piety point to the limitation of conventional understandings of conversion, an issue taken up in recent years by scholars in diverse fields of study. Although they differ in their approaches, these scholars have interrogated the appropriateness of the term 'conversion' to religious traditions other than Christianity and instantiations of Christian practice in different social and historical contexts. Rejecting early influential work by Nock (1933) and Hall (1924), for example, who understood religious conversion as a radical and abrupt change marked by a single moment or event inspired by an experience of the divine, scholars such as Buckster and Glazier (2003) argue that this fails to capture the particularities of other experiences of religious change. Rendered archetypal by the revelatory conversions of Paul on the road to Damascus or Augustine of Hippo, and further instantiated by the experiences of some charismatic and evangelical Christians today (Meyer 1999; Harding 2000), the revelatory theory of conversion markedly ignores cases in which actors or groups experience religious change as a gradual and continuous process. This includes Christians in Europe during the Middle Ages (Morrison 1992), Pentecostals and Charismatic Christians in present-day Sweden (Coleman 2000) or Jamaica (Austin-Broos 1997) and Bengalis who gradually became Muslims over the course of the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries (Eaton 1996).

Scholars also note that there is no equivalent or cognate term for 'conversion' in Islamic thought and tradition, a linguistic indication of how religious change is conceptualised differently in Islam. Based on his assessment of Quranic passages, and on the early history of Islam, Dutton argues that for those developing new-found Islamic piety, their experience of religious change is understood in terms of their 'becoming Muslim', for which the verb *aslama*, meaning 'submitting' or 'submission', is used (Dutton 1999, pp. 151–2). Similarly, Jawad notes that although the formal act of becoming Muslim entails the recitation of the *shahada* or testament of faith in the presence of at least two witnesses, after this public declaration there are no further stipulated requirements; it is assumed that like other Muslims, these 'new Muslims' will continue becoming Muslim by living in accordance with Islamic precepts and practices (Jawad 2006, pp. 155). In her examination of women in North America and Europe who are developing new-found Islamic piety, van Nieuwkerk notes her interlocutors' cautious use of terminology: most discussed their experiences in terms of 'taking *shahada*', 'becoming Muslim', 'embracing Islam' or 'reversion to Islam' (van Nieuwkerk 2006, p. 151). Rather than the term 'conversion', with its connotation of sudden and radical change, her interlocutors preferred expressions 'convey[ing] their feelings of a gradual "dawning of truth"', expressions that fundamentally shaped how they narrated their experiences and reconstructed their life stories in relation to Islam (van Nieuwkerk 2006, pp. 151–2).

Although domestic workers in Kuwait drew on similar terminology, and also understood their experiences of developing new-found Islamic piety as processual,

unlike van Nieuwkerk's interlocutors and those of other researchers examining 'new Muslims' in the West (e.g. Rouse 2004), they neither discussed their experiences in terms of life history narratives nor, as mentioned earlier, did they focus on their individual motivations or reasons for becoming Muslim. In addition, unlike the subjects of Viswanathan (1998), Eaton (1996) and Bulliet (1979), whose religious transformations entailed changes in their sociopolitical identifications and belonging, domestic workers did not experience or discuss their new-found religious piety in these terms. In Kuwait, they are identified with, and their sociopolitical status is linked to, their occupation and ethnonational backgrounds, both of which remain unchanged. Domestic workers also discussed their families and households, in both Kuwait and their places of origin, as their loci of belonging, spaces in which their relationships were not being severed but reconfigured through their developing practice of Islam. Neither articulating their experiences of becoming Muslim in individualising terms nor experiencing them as a change in their sociopolitical identifications and belonging, domestic workers' new-found piety highlighted the importance of a different realm—the household—and the work these women undertake therein as a space through which they become attuned to, and begin to adopt, Islam. Thus, their developing practice of Islam points to how the activities and interrelationships that comprise migrant domestic work are not reducible to conventional understandings of waged labour, and to the household as a site through which transnational labour migration and Islam intersect.

Background: Conversion to Islam or Becoming Muslim?

Flush with petrodollars, over the past 30 years Kuwait has become an important second-tier destination for migrant domestic workers from south and south-east Asia and, more recently, east Africa. During this period, the number of female domestic workers in Kuwait has increased from 12,000 to over 500,000 (Shah, Al-Qudsi & Shah 1991, Shah, Shah, Chowdhury, & Menon 2002).⁵ Of varying ethnic, national, linguistic, educational and religious backgrounds, in Kuwait these women share a common set of experiences. Whether cooking, cleaning or caring for children and the elderly, the gendered labour they perform is crucial to Kuwaitis' social reproduction. Comprising one-sixth of the total population, and employed in over 90 per cent of households in Kuwait, they are a ubiquitous part of Kuwait's social landscape, but one that is largely disregarded (Shah et al. 2002). As scholarship on domestic workers in the Arab Gulf States and Asia more generally has underlined, migrant domestic workers are situated in an ambiguous structural position. Falling outside the purview of existing labour laws, market calculations, kinship networks and citizenship rights and entitlements, yet integral and intimately imbricated in their employers' everyday lives, domestic workers occupy a precarious space of indeterminacy, of both belonging and exclusion (Constable 1997; Gamburd 2000; Lan 2006; Shah & Menon 1997).

Although existing scholarly literature often focuses on the precariousness of domestic workers' situation, this focus may overshadow discussions about other

dimensions of these women's experiences of migration. When it comes to domestic workers' newly developing practice of Islam in Kuwait, it is striking how little attention this relatively widespread phenomenon has drawn. Over the past decade, tens of thousands, some say over 30,000,⁶ of domestic workers in Kuwait have taken *shahada*, the Islamic testament of faith, making them the largest group of foreign residents and migrants to adopt Islamic precepts and practices.

Despite the scholarly silence, in Kuwait the new-found piety of these domestic workers has generated a great deal of boisterous debate. These discussions centre on one question: Why? Why are these women adopting Islamic precepts and practices? Elsewhere (Ahmad 2009), I map out two sets of explanations—utilitarian and indoctrination—that circulate transnationally as popular media accounts, human rights reports and discussions among local and international human rights officials, liberal political activists in Kuwait, labour recruitment agencies and people participating in Kuwait's Islamic *dawa*⁷ movement. My research suggests there are two explanatory frames—articulated in the distinction between 'converting' to Islam and 'becoming Muslim'—that index and instantiate two competing visions of political practice in Kuwait: those of liberal secularists and Islamic reformers.

Groups focusing on domestic workers' 'conversion' to Islam include members of Kuwait's foreign resident populations, self-styled liberal movements, local and international human rights organisations, labour agencies and foreign embassies. These groups often questioned the sincerity of domestic workers' conversions given the marginal status of these women in Kuwait. They viewed domestic workers' new-found piety as either their self-interested, calculated attempts to wrest better remuneration or treatment from their employers or as coming about due to the pressure, implicit or explicit, brought to bear upon them by the families with whom they work.⁸ The issue of sincerity is important to these groups' determination of whether domestic workers' conversions constitute a political issue. Predicated on secular liberal understandings of governance, in which religious belief and practice are subject to individual choice and are relegated to the private sphere, these groups regard religious conversion as an intrinsically private matter, one that becomes a political issue only insofar as it is brought about through pressure or coercion. In such cases, these groups look to state or state-like institutions—as neutral moral arbiters—to adjudicate and uphold the rights of domestic workers to their religious beliefs and practices. However, they recognise how difficult the protection of their religious rights is in Kuwait given that domestic workers not only work and reside within their employers' households, but, under Kuwait's citizen-devolved *kefala* or sponsorship system, they also obtain their work and residency visas through their employers (Longva 1997, 1999; Crystal 2005). Under these circumstances, state intervention would necessitate the expansion of state authority and the fraught reconfiguration of governance between households and state institutions. As a result, in the absence of state protection or oversight, domestic workers' conversions to Islam are read as symptomatic of their marginal status in Kuwait.

The second set of explanations attribute domestic workers' 'becoming Muslim' to the activities of Kuwait's Islamic *dawa* and reform movements, specifically their success in reaching out to Kuwait's diverse non-Muslim population and in promoting the Islamic reform of Kuwaiti families and households. The activity of these movements has developed in response to demographic shifts in Kuwait. From the mid-1970s onwards, Kuwait's foreign resident and migrant population, which today comprises two-thirds of the country's total population, has shifted from being predominantly Arab to being largely south and south-east Asian. In the face of these changes, the form and composition of Kuwait's Islamic *dawa* movement have been reconfigured as non-Arabs have come to be included in their activities. What started as a series of classes meant to teach Arabic, Kuwaiti customs and Islam to interested foreign residents and migrants, as well as to introduce non-Muslims to Islam, has proliferated into a diverse, multilingual and sprawling transnational movement consisting of tens of thousands of Muslims of diverse ethnic and national backgrounds, dozens of outreach centres, several multilingual mosques and a panoply of television and radio programmes. As the largest group of newly practising Muslims, domestic workers index the success of this *dawa* movement. They also point to the movement's success in encouraging pious practice within Kuwaiti families and households, sites Islamic reformers consider of paramount importance to the production and reproduction of Muslim subjects. Domestic workers' new-found piety is seen as both resulting from and further encouraging Islamic practice within the household, what one teacher once described as the womb of the *ummah* (the community of believers).

Although incommensurable, both sets of explanations for domestic workers' 'conversion to Islam' or 'becoming Muslim' underscore the importance of the household. For groups promoting secular liberal forms of governance, domestic workers' conversions are regarded as symptomatic of their marginal status in Kuwait, a status largely related to their position within the household, a realm in which the Kuwaiti state is reluctant to intercede. Among members of Kuwait's Islamic movements, the household is regarded as a site of possibility in their development of a rightly guided *ummah*.

House Talk and Becoming Muslim

Domestic workers' articulations of their new-found piety also point to the importance of the household, but in ways that are more muted and subtle than the two explanatory models summarised above. I slowly became attuned to these subtle ways over the course of visiting my interlocutors in their Kuwaiti households, meeting with their employers, attending the classes at Kuwait's Islamic *dawa* movement's women's centre and by visiting some of my Nepali interlocutors in Nepal. Through these fieldwork experiences I came to appreciate how their households, both in the places they had migrated from and in Kuwait, were not just sites bookending their transnational migrations and journeys. Rather, their

households were dense and vital sites of intimacy, labouring, affect, economic exchange and asymmetrical gendered, aged, raced and kinship relationships that animated their transnational movements and experiences. For domestic workers developing new-found Islamic piety, their households in Kuwait constituted spaces of everyday activity and interaction through which they gradually came to develop Islamic sensibilities—Islamic sensibilities that led them to re-experience and rework their households in both Kuwait and their homes of origin. Their discussions of their new-found piety were enmeshed in our ‘house talk’ and focused on what becoming Muslim entailed, rather than the question of motivation or cause. To convey and illustrate my interlocutors’ experiences requires us to dwell awhile with them. It requires me to recount and to share their stories, albeit in condensed and stylised forms.

When Mariam and I first met, I remember being struck by a rather ornate key strung with a blue satin ribbon that she had wound around her wrist. When she spoke, Mariam often gesticulated, and particularly pointed comments were accompanied by the swaying of the key from her wrist. During my first and on subsequent visits to her home, Mariam would unwind the ribbon just enough to open the front door. Only two keys existed for the house, she told me; one held by Umm Sayyid, the head of the household, and the other held by her. Mariam’s key indexed her position within the household: she had been living and working with the family since the early 1970s and was considered to be the second mother of the house. Mariam had become such an integral part of the family that when the family decided to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, Mariam accompanied them. Although Catholic, and although she did not participate in the rituals, Mariam had asked to go because of the significance of the trip for the family. Several months before the pilgrimage, Umm Sayyid’s mother had passed away. She was the matriarch of the family and had been Mariam’s mentor since her arrival in Kuwait from Mumbai at the age of 19 years. Several months’ later, Sayyid, the eldest son of the house, was going to marry. Between their mourning and their hopes for the upcoming marriage, the family had decided to go on pilgrimage, and Mariam accompanied them. During her stay in Mecca, Mariam spent most of her time in the hotel room, where she could see pilgrims and processions from her window. What she saw struck her and spurred her, as she put it, ‘to *think* about Islam’. For over 30 years she had been witnessing the family’s practice of Islam, but she ‘did not note it’. When she returned to Kuwait, she continued going to Church regularly, but found herself becoming more attuned to Islamic precepts and practices. As she stated in one of our conversations, ‘I don’t know really when or how, but I started thinking, seeing . . . not just with my head or eyes, but with my heart . . . differently’. Mariam began reading a series of pamphlets in Hindi and primer books she had obtained from the *dawa* movement, and she began observing more closely the family’s prayers and their reading and recitation of the Qur’an. Two years later, still attending church, Mariam began fasting during Ramadan and attending classes at the *dawa* movement’s women’s centre.

Mariam's experiences resonate with those of Sara—the woman whose comments prompted this paper. Sara and I were introduced through Shaima, a member of the extended family within whose household Sara worked. As Shaima and I made our way through her extended family's shared courtyard and gardens and into the house of her grandmother Gulnar, Shaima cautioned me that although Sara had agreed to meet me, she could be a little abrupt and impatient. She told me the story of how, when Sara had first migrated to Kuwait from her village in southern India in the mid-1980s, Gulnar had hired her to help the other domestic workers of the compound with the cleaning. It became quickly apparent that cleaning, which required some level of cooperation with the other women, was not something Sara would excel at. She had a brusque personality and little patience for the other domestic workers in the compound, women she often dismissed as gossipy and silly. She was, however, an efficient and skilled cook and so Gulnar moved her to the kitchen, where Sara worked for the next 15 years.

Given her reputation for having a daunting personality, it therefore came as a great surprise to Sara when Gulnar requested that she be her caregiver when she developed cancer, an illness that kept her bedridden:

Gulnar Bibi, she asked me to be the one to look after her because she knew that I am strong. She told me, may God look over her, that this illness is going to be difficult and I need someone who won't be too soft . . . I need someone who will make sure I am doing what I should.

In tending to Gulnar, what Sara remembered most was waking up early in the morning, going to Gulnar's room, turning on a cassette recording of Quranic recitations and sitting with her while the rest of the household busied themselves with the coming day. Over the next 5 years, they shared in this ritual. When Gulnar succumbed to her illness, Sara found herself continuing to listen to these recitations. Gradually she began to supplement these with Hindi translations of the recitations, as well as with other readings about Islamic history and what she called 'scientific' or 'practical' Muslim books—books by authors like Harun Yahya, who use Islam to explain natural phenomena, and books outlining how to perform Muslim prayers and rituals.

Mariam and Sara's stories illustrate two key dimensions of domestic workers' experiences of their new-found piety in Kuwait. Whether it be 'starting to see and hear with my heart', as Mariam described it, or listening to recitations of the Qur'an on an everyday basis, their experiences of developing new forms of piety and an interest in Islam were marked not by the extraordinary, but by the everyday. Punctuated by few, if any, dramatic events, miracles or visions, domestic workers' experiences demonstrate the slow unexpected infusing of incipient protean Islamic sensibilities, affects, awareness and practices into the folds of their day-to-day relationships and activities—relationships and activities that were concentrated within the household. Domestic workers' gradually developing pious practice contrasts, as we have seen, with conventional understandings of religious conversions that often emphasise sudden or radical transformations.

Mariam's and Sara's articulations of their experiences further underscore the importance of households as sites in and through which they come to adopt Islamic precepts and practices, but in ways that contrast with how liberal secularists and Islamic reformers discuss them. Despite their differing perspectives, members of these groups attributed their new-found piety to their position or location within the household. For liberal secularist activists in Kuwait, Kuwaiti households constitute a space within which the state is reluctant or unable to intervene, a space within which domestic workers are subject to unequal power relationships, leading many to convert. For Islamic reformers, households constitute an integral social space through which the Muslim *ummah* is formed, a space their activities have increasingly sought to reform. In contrast, Mariam, Sara and my other interlocutors did not discuss their new-found piety as developing because of their asymmetrical relationships of power with their employers, or as a consequence of the activities of Kuwait's Islamic *dawa* movement. As I discuss below, they began participating in the *dawa* movement's activities, most notably attending classes at the *dawa* movement's women's centre, *after* developing an interest in Islam within their households. In contrast with both these discourses, in their conversations with me the domestic workers' 'house talk' pointed to the household as a site of ongoing activity, interaction and work through which they—often unexpectedly—became attuned to and began practising Islam. Their experiences underscore a facet of paid domestic work that recent studies on migrant domestic workers, as well as affective and immaterial labour, have come to analyse.⁹ The work undertaken by domestic workers, such as accompanying and tending to family members during trips and caring for the elderly and the infirm, necessarily involves the disciplining and training of domestic workers' comportment, affect and sense of self (Anderson 2000; Constable 1997; Hardt & Negri 2004; Hochschild 2000, 2002; Lan 2006; Yan 2008; Weeks 2007). What existing research has not accounted for, and what migrant domestic workers in Kuwait's experiences point to, are the ways in which domestic work can be infused with religious ideas and practices. Mariam's and Sara's stories point to the confluence of Islamic ethical practice (Mahmood 2004; Hirschkind 2006; Henkel 2005) and affective or immaterial labour in the reshaping of domestic workers' subjectivities. For Mariam and Sara, this process took many years to develop, whereas shorter periods of time were reported by other interlocutors. Most described the circumstances as unexpected, rather than inevitable. Here, domestic workers' everyday experiences within the household figure not just as sites of repetition, reproduction, habit and disciplining, as discussed by Henri Lefebvre (1991), Pierre Bourdieu (1990) and Michel Foucault (1977), but also of new-found possibilities and open endedness that the work of Ernst Bloch (1986) and Gilles Deleuze (1994, 2006) suggest. Both Bloch and Deleuze point, in different ways, to a plurality intrinsic to experiences, encounters, situations and utterances. For domestic workers, these possibilities were experienced in relation to Islamic precepts and practices, ones learned in relation to their work within households.

The Islamic *Dawa* Movement in Kuwait

Mariam's and Sara's stories also illustrate how domestic workers' further learning about Islam was channelled through Kuwait's Islamic *dawa* movement. Transnational in its composition and scope, this *dawa* movement is animated by one objective: to promote Islamic learning and living among Kuwait's non-Arabic-speaking population. Sprawling and fluid in its composition and form, the movement has developed in relation to the presence of Kuwait's non-Arab foreign resident and migrant population. Today, it is comprised of a multitude of study circles and teaching centres that produce and distribute informational and instructional material about Islam and offer a series of courses ranging from introductory to more advanced classes. The *dawa* movement strives to be inclusionary and encompassing in terms of the linguistic, ethnic and national backgrounds of its participants. Members do not subscribe exclusively to any of the four Islamic *madhab*, or schools of jurisprudence, and are linked with other Islamic modernist reform movements both in Kuwait and across the world.

This *dawa* movement is widespread and well known in Kuwait. Domestic workers seeking to further their understanding and practice of Islam learn of the movement's resources and activities through word of mouth—from fellow domestic workers, other foreign residents and migrants or their employers. Most of the women I got to know obtained pamphlets, books and cassettes produced by the movement. Many also attended classes offered by the women's movement—most notably their 'Classes for Newly Practising Muslims'. Offered in the languages spoken by these women—such as Hindi/Urdu, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesian, Sinhala, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, Amharic, Tigre and Chinese—and facilitated by teachers who typically come from the same places as the migrant women, these classes were spaces in which domestic workers could learn Islamic precepts and practices among women from similar backgrounds. They could also address issues specific to their situation and circumstances—issues that more often than not revolved around their relationships and responsibilities within their household, both in Kuwait and in their natal homes.

Like everyday life in the household, these classes were infused with repetition and re-articulation of everyday experience through Islamic stories, tenets and practices. Simple in their design and execution, the classes focused on discussions about the five pillars of Islam, and on the performance of prayer and the purification or ablutions associated with prayer. Teachers would repeatedly and recursively cycle through these Islamic principles and practices, eliciting and interweaving their students' questions and comments. In so doing, they tried to establish connections and underscore the resonance between Islam and students' everyday activities. Mariam's experience of attending these classes illustrates how they interwove the everyday into the classroom. She initially began attending these classes in order to improve her recitation of the Qur'an. She told me that her *zabaan*—her tongue or language—was different from that of her Kuwaiti family and, to her ears, her tongue was unable to properly recite

the passages of the Qur'an. She hoped that being taught by and alongside women who had the same *zabaan* would address this problem. During one class when the teacher was translating a passage they had just been reciting, one emphasising the importance of filial obligation and responsibility, Mariam found an opportunity to ask about an issue she had been worrying about. She had recently spoken to her parents in India over the phone, a conversation during which she had broached with them her new interest in Islam. Their response, as she had feared, was overwhelmingly negative. They told her—in no uncertain terms—that should she convert they would cease to have anything to do with her. This worried Mariam because her parents were old and infirm and her remittance was their only source of income. She concluded her account to the class by saying that although she had started reading the Qur'an and fasting, and although she would probably live the rest of her life in Kuwait as the second house mother with Umm Sayyid's family, she dared not take *shahada*, the Islamic testament of faith, for fear of alienating her parents and because of her sense of duty towards them.

In the ensuing discussion, several suggestions were offered. One woman proposed Mariam take *shahada* because her parents would eventually come round and accept her decision: 'They would have to, wouldn't they?' Another woman suggested she take *shahada* but not tell her parents: 'How would they know?..and that way Mariam you can fulfil your duty to both them and Allah'. Another woman suggested she wait awhile and gradually broach the topic again with her parents: 'Allah will understand'. In deference to her greater knowledge of Islam, Mariam asked the teacher, Sister Shersha, for her thoughts:

Mariam, I think you are right to wait. Taking *shahada* as you might wish will not be good for your parents right now, and as we have learned in the Qur'an and Hadith, we must treat our parents with kindness, gentleness, respect . . . Maybe they are in shock, maybe they don't understand Islam, I don't know. But I think Hema's idea is good: wait awhile and then talk to them again. And when do you next go back to India? Maybe wait until you have a chance to visit them, talk with them, tell them about Islam, and so maybe they will change their mind. Have patience. Being patient and honouring our parents are things Muslims should do.

For the next year Mariam struggled with simultaneously trying to practise and reconcile two Islamic virtues—being dutiful to her parents and dealing with her parents' opposition to her becoming Muslim. She did so with patience. Her attempts to cope with her situation, a source of ongoing discussion and sympathy among the women of her class, points to how these classes were not simply conceived as informational and instructional spaces of Islamic learning. Rather, the classes constituted spaces of ethical formation and deliberation, in which students struggled to understand what was incumbent upon them as Muslims. In the classes, students learned Islam not as a set of rigid principles to be mapped onto their lives but, as discussed by Mahmood (2004) and Henkel (2005) with respect to Islamic ethical practice in Egypt and Turkey, as principles understood, instantiated, practised and striven for in and through their day to day activities and experiences.

The experiences of another interlocutor of mine, Rahman, resonate with those of Mariam and also underscore the often porous boundaries between different religious traditions as discussed by many of my interlocutors. Rahman initially began to attend the *dawa* movement's 'New Muslim' classes because of her puzzlement and scepticism over her Muslim friends' repeated assertions that 'Christians are Muslims too'. Bible in hand, she attended the classes periodically in order to address questions related to these and other issues:

I remember thinking, Islam is simple, and Sister Jamila understood Jesus simply... this was a problem for me, so I kept going [to the classes], I kept pushing. But this idea of asking God to lead us on the straight path... this is something I did before. I used to ask Jesus to show me the right path in what I do... I started to think maybe it [Islam] isn't so very different.

Here, Rahman was referring to the concept of *fitrah*. A term often invoked by women participating in Kuwait's Islamic *dawa* movement, *fitrah* was understood to be a form of moral reasoning that guides people's actions; an innate, God-given capacity to distinguish right from wrong and 'stay on the right path'. The *daiyat* often told me that because of their *fitrah*, every human being is latently a Muslim. Being Muslim is understood to be a capability that everyone is endowed with; but, they added, it is one actualised through constant effort. This constant effort is necessary because if everyone is born with *fitrah*, everyone also has the propensity to be forgetful and stray. They pointed to prophets and revelations, including Jesus and the New and Old Testaments, as being forms of secondary guidance to shepherd people back on the straight path. People may take up practices not in keeping with this guidance, or they may not heed it, but this does not nullify their being Muslim. Their capacity remains. Within this context, the *daiyat* pointed to the inadequacy of the term 'converting'. As one explained:

We never say that this person, that person was made a Muslim, because they are already Muslim. That is why we don't say they convert, because they are *reverting*, they are coming back to their *fitrah*. Just as we Muslims are trying to keep to our *fitrah*.

In our discussions, the concept of *fitrah* held deep resonance for Rahman. She often puzzled over the term and used it when discussing similarities between how she practised her religion and how her Muslim friends practised theirs. When Rahman went to visit her household in India—consisting of her son, her husband, his mother who was also Rahman's aunt, her siblings and cousins—she used the term *fitrah* to explain her interest in becoming Muslim:

I thought this might help them see some similarities, make them softer to Islam. I was wrong. At first my husband thought I was interested in Islam because I had met a Muslim man, but after I explained this wasn't true, he said I had brought a devil-spirit with me from Kuwait.

Rahman's mother-in-law told her she was being selfish and that her actions were jeopardising the family's cohesion. When Rahman returned to Kuwait, where her mother had also come for domestic work, she was almost immediately visited by her. Rahman's mother urged her to reconsider her position and weigh the potential consequences of converting to Islam—likely divorce from her husband and ostracism from her extended family.

Seeking counsel, Rahman went to visit Sister Jamila at the *dawa* Movement's Women's Centre. Sister Jamila suggested that Rahman be patient, wait awhile and broach the topic again with her family, saying 'it will be better for you and them'. Several months of back-and-forth telephoning later, Rahman's family decided on a course of action: they assembled their financial resources, making it possible for her husband to migrate to Kuwait. Her husband hoped that by being in Kuwait with Rahman, he would pre-empt her taking of *shahada*. Rahman hoped that by living in Kuwait her husband would come to understand her interest in Islam. When I left Kuwait, their situation remained unresolved. However, before I left I had a chance to ask Sister Jamila about Rahman's predicament:

What to do? She has a child, a husband, her family, as well as herself to consider. . . Maybe her husband will become Muslim or at least understand Islam?...*Inshallah*, she will take the *shahada* and embrace Islam fully [later], but she is acting with *iman* (faith) and *sabr* (patience) now. She is learning and doing what we Muslims should do.

Sister Jamila's response, emphasising Rahman's continued engagement with her household members in India *through* her practice of Islam, underscores an important dimension of domestic workers' experiences of their new-found understanding of Islam. Domestic workers come to apprehend and approach Islamic precepts and practices in and through previous understandings and social relationships that comprise their daily lived experiences. Greater understanding and proficiency in their practice of Islam is achieved by constant striving, a constant tacking back and forth between Islamic precepts and practices and the stuff of everyday life through which these are apprehended, approached and actualised. For domestic workers who are developing new-found Islamic piety, the stuff of everyday life necessarily includes their pre-existing religious traditions and household relationships. As Rahman's situation illustrates, their becoming Muslim is not seen as a renouncing or rejection of their previous lives, religious traditions and household relationships, but as a re-engagement and reworking of them. It is understood as a dynamic and encompassing process in which the boundaries between different religious traditions and other forms of belonging can be porous and fluid.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, tens of thousands of migrant women, mostly domestic workers, women like Mariam, Sara and Rahman, have developed new-found Islamic

piety in Kuwait. Occurring in a much maligned and understudied region—the Arabian Peninsula—this widespread phenomenon has either been elided, cynically dismissed or the motivations for these conversions, and the importance of Islamic movements to these conversions, assumed. My interlocutors' focus on 'house talk' in our conversations suggests a shift in analytical focus, one emphasising their everyday relationships and activities within households as generative of their new-found Islamic piety. The activities undertaken by domestic workers in Kuwait—such as listening to Quranic sermons as part of caring for an elderly employer or tending to their employers while they are on pilgrimage—where religious practices and ritual performances may suffuse their household work and where their work involves the disciplining and reshaping of their comportment, personalities and affect, leads some to develop an interest in Islam and new-found religious piety. Thus, their experiences unsettle easy distinctions and point to the subtle imbrication of political, economic and religious activities—namely household work and everyday embodied Islamic practice within the household. 'House talk' and domestic workers' new-found Islamic piety point to households as dense and vital spaces of confluence between Islamic ethical practice and the affective and immaterial and immaterial labour entailed by domestic work.

Domestic workers' experiences contrast with those of other non-citizens in Kuwait, most notably male migrant workers and middle-class foreign residents, groups that are far less likely to develop new-found Islamic piety. Although sharing the common experience of transnational migration, these groups have a profoundly different experience of residing in Kuwait than domestic workers. Their experiences of work, and their social interactions are largely limited to fellow ethnonationals, whereas domestic workers, whether they are hired by Kuwaiti nationals or well-heeled foreign residents,¹⁰ work and reside with employers who are invariably of different ethnonational backgrounds. Their experiences underscore what is perhaps an unexpected feature of Kuwait: households constitute one of Kuwait's most cosmopolitan spaces, spaces in which domestic workers come to observe and experience different forms of self-hood and possibilities of living—forms and possibilities often articulated in relation to Islam.

Domestic workers experienced becoming Muslim not as a radical break from their previous relationships and lives, but as a reworking of them. They experienced their religious transformations as a gradual and ongoing process in which they continually strove to learn and incorporate Islamic precepts and practices into the folds of their everyday experiences. The outcomes of this process—the nature of their reworked relationships with their household members and forms in which these women came to instantiate Islam—were far from clear at the outset. For Mariam, her adoption of Islam was enmeshed in the renegotiation of her relationship with her parents in India and her deepening sense of belonging to Umm Sayyid's family in Kuwait. Sara's new-found Islamic piety resulted in her return to her village in southern India with a Muslim husband and the intention of establishing a mosque. For Rahman, her practice of Islam involved the often fraught reworking of her relationships with her

husband and family in both Kuwait and India. Their experiences not only illustrate how domestic workers come to learn, and engage in, Islamic ethical deliberation through their pre-existing relationships and sociocultural practices and understandings, but also how the advice these women received from their peers and Islamic teachers was attuned to the particularities of their situations. As Rahman's and Mariam's parental and familial opposition to their practice of Islam indicates, what may initially appear to be constraints on their practice of Islam—in their cases, their taking the *shahada*—were not understood as obstacles to their becoming Muslim, but as a necessary part thereof. Here, their household relationships and activities figure as sites not just generative of their new-found piety, but also as spaces generative of novel instantiations and expressions of Islam. Informed by, but not limited to, specific schools of Islamic thought, traditions of jurisprudence and forms of Islam that have developed out of particular sociohistorical contexts (e.g. Islam as practised in India or China), domestic workers' instantiations and expressions are emerging through their everyday household relationships and practices, household experiences that animate and are animated by transnational migration, the feminisation of migrant labour and globalising religious movements in our contemporary world.

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Notes

- [1] A term I use to denote an ongoing belief and practice of Islam that captures the dynamic and processual understanding my interlocutors have of what it means to be Muslim.
- [2] *Yeh* is the Urdu/Hindi word for this, *beit* is Arabic for house, *ki* is an Urdu/Hindi feminine possessive suffix and *baat* is the Urdu/Hindi word for talk or speech.
- [3] The Arabic word for 'those who call people to Islam'.
- [4] Their discussions resonate with Talal Asad's observation that religious conversion appears to require explanations in a way that secular conversion into modern ways of being does not (Asad 1996, p. 263). Asad argues that this overriding focus on explanations for religious conversion recuperates the modern notion of the rational, agentive subject in contexts that fundamentally challenge this understanding of the subject. He suggests that the focus on 'choice' and explanations for religious conversions both presupposes and re-instantiates a particular understanding of subjectivity (i.e. a modern, agentive subject) that may differ from how subjects are understood in the discursive frames of religious traditions.

- [5] I also base these numbers on figures given to me by labour recruitment agencies and the embassies of labour-sending countries.
- [6] This figure is based on estimates compiled by Kuwait's Islamic *dawa* movement, Ministry of Awqaf and foreign embassies.
- [7] *Dawa* means to call or invite, hence *dawa* movement refers to individuals, groups and organisations in Kuwait that are calling or inviting people to belief and practice Islam.
- [8] I am often asked whether domestic workers new-found piety can be attributed to how they are treated by their employers; for example, whether abusive employers coerce them to convert, whether these women convert in the hope of being treated better by their employers or, alternatively, whether kindly employers inspire them to convert. These questions are based on several assumptions, notably (a) that Kuwaiti employers prefer having domestic workers who are Muslim and/or are positively disposed or encouraging of domestic workers' conversions and (b) that domestic workers' conversions debunk stereotypes about their overall negative treatment in Kuwait. My intensive work with twenty-five domestic workers and their households, as well as interviews with over 100 domestic workers, their employers and *daiyat*, suggest a more complicated picture. Many of my interlocutors indicated that their employers were wary of their conversions because of their potential implications, including the possibility these women may be disowned by their families and communities at home, thereby necessitating employers' ongoing support of these women or because employers were concerned they may be perceived as having pressured their domestic workers to convert. Many employers I spoke with further indicated that they treated their Muslim domestic workers no different from non-Muslim workers, an issue largely corroborated by the domestic workers I interviewed. In addition, many employers' criteria or preferences in hiring domestic workers were not based on the religious background of these women (e.g. they indicated that they wanted domestic workers who were well trained, who were trustworthy with their children etc.) and those employers who would prefer to have a Muslim domestic worker employed one who was already a practising Muslim.
- [9] As for whether domestic workers' new-found practice of Islam debunks stereotypes about their treatment in Kuwait, this too is not necessarily clear. Among those who are knowledgeable or who work in Kuwait's domestic work sector, it is generally acknowledged that 8–10 per cent of domestic workers experience problems while working in Kuwait. Of this, most problems, approximately 7–8 per cent, relate to salary disputes (e.g. withholding of pay) and 2–3 per cent relate to physical and sexual abuse. How this compares or contrasts with the situation of migrant domestic workers in other regions, such as east Asia, North America and Europe, where, with the exception of the UK, domestic workers are also not covered by labour laws and where domestic workers' sociopolitical situations are often precarious, is unclear owing to the paucity of data available about this issue. Domestic workers indicated to me that the development of their new-found piety did relate to the relationships they developed with their employers, but in ways that defy easy formulations. For example, some of my interlocutors indicated that they developed new-found Islamic piety despite working with problematic employers and/or despite working with employers who they characterised as being Muslim in name only (i.e. who they felt did not practice Islam properly). It is also worth noting—something that is often not mentioned in news media or human rights reports—that although domestic workers may be treated well by their employers, their experiences of migration and living and working within Kuwaiti households may still be difficult owing to their social, linguistic and cultural dislocation, as well as to the generally difficult nature of the work they undertake (i.e. the difficulty of domestic work is not reducible to ill-treatment by employers). Their experiences point to the need for more detailed and nuanced discussions of domestic workers' relationships and experiences of working and residing within Kuwaiti households—and how these, in turn,

relate to religious practices and beliefs—something I am attempting to do to a certain extent in this paper and more extensively in my broader project.

- [10] According to Kuwaiti law, foreign residents who are granted the right to sponsor and employ a migrant domestic worker can only do so with women who are not fellow nationals (i.e. an Indian national cannot employ a domestic worker from India).

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