

Making Meaning of the Hagar/Hajar Narratives

The first texts from the Islamic and Christian canonical scriptures that were read and discussed in the group were the narratives about Hagar/Hajar. The texts from both the Old Testament and the *Hadith* were sent to the participants by mail before the meeting with the invitation. This was done to give the participants the opportunity to prepare for the discussions of the texts if they wanted to and to show which textual versions of the stories would be the starting point of the discussion. The participants' possible pre-knowledge about the narratives was not mapped beforehand.

The texts were in Norwegian, and the text from Genesis was edited to include the whole story about Hagar and exclude other parts of the narrative about the family of Abraham. The Hajar story from the *Hadith* includes one verse from the Koran. The biblical text in Norwegian was taken from the most commonly used version, i.e., that by the Norwegian Bible Society 1978 (Bibelen 1978). The Norwegian version of the *Hadith* narrative was taken from a textbook of source texts used by Norwegian teachers in religious education (Thomassen and Rasmussen 1999: 198-99). In this work I will use English editions of these texts: the New Revised Standard Version (Bible 1989) and an English translation of the *hadith* by Al-Bukhari (CMJE 2008-2009). My criterion for selecting these versions was their degree of proximity to the Norwegian text versions used in the group. I looked for similarity in both content and wording.¹

The reading, conversation, and discussion of the Hagar/Hajar narratives took place during the last half of the second meeting and during the third meeting.

¹ Some verses in the Norwegian translation of the Genesis text, however, are closer to the King James Version (Prickett and Carroll 1997).

Four of the discussions/conversations from the meaning-making process of the Hagar/Hajar narratives are presented in this chapter. They are selected because of their relevance for showing various meaning-making strategies and for portraying discussions I found interesting, important, and conducive to the aim of the study. The presentation of the discussions follows the chronology of the group's communicative process, except for the first and second discussions, which overlapped in time. The first discussion concerns the practice of naming women in relation to their children, and it took place before and after the second discussion. The second is a discussion that started with questioning how Hagar/Hajar could leave Ishmael, her son, in the desert, and engages the participants in discussing possible answers. The third is a more general, reflective sequence that addresses several themes, but this discussion is marked by longer contributions and more thorough reflections on the narratives, many of them testimonial in character. The fourth discussion is concerned with the notions of obedience and forgiveness and their relevance in illustrating differences between the Christian and Islamic traditions.

At the second meeting both Hagar/Hajar stories were read aloud in the group by Susanne and Eva, who shared the reading of the Genesis story about Hagar between them, and Aira who read the text from the *Hadith*. This meant that Christian participants read the text from the Christian tradition and a Muslim participant read the text from the Islamic tradition. The readers volunteered and, following my suggestion, the biblical text was read before the text from the *Hadith*.² The third meeting also started with reading the two texts, but this time

² The question of which text that should be read first represented a challenge. Obviously, one of the texts had to be read before the other. Since both texts were made accessible to the participants in advance, and thus presented simultaneously to them before the meeting, I suggested that the biblical text be read first, for historical reasons. No one objected. The chronological argument represents some problems, however, because this in itself may give the impression of a hierarchy among the texts. There was, however, no break between the readings of the two texts, so the discussion started with both texts at the same time.

the participants read both texts silently before the discussion started. The Hagar/Hajar narratives are quoted in the following text, to invite the readers of *this* text to start with a silent reading of the narratives.

The Hagar/Hajar Narratives in the Old Testament and the Hadith

Genesis 16:1-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

1 Now, Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, 2 and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord had prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 So, after Abram had lived for ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. 4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" 6 But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. 7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." 9 The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." 10 The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." 11 And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. 12 He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." 13 So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "have I really seen God and

remained alive after seeing him?"³ 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi, it lies between Kadesh and Bered. 15 Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Genesis 21:8-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

8 The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 10 So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." 11 The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. 13 As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast her child under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand for I will make a great nation of him." 19 Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a

³ In the King James Version, this verse reads as follows: "And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?"

drink. 20 God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Hajar in the *Hadith* and the Koran: Al-Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 55, Number 583 (narrated by Ibn Abbas):

⁴Abraham brought her [the mother of Ishmael] and her son Ishmael while she was suckling him, to a place near the Ka'ba under a tree on the spot of Zam-zam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Mecca, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small water-skin containing some water, and set out homeward. Ishmael's mother followed him saying, "O Abraham! Where are you going leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything (to enjoy)?" She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, "Has Allah ordered you to do so?" He said, "Yes." She said, "Then He will not neglect us," and returned while Abraham proceeded onwards, and on reaching the Thaniya where they could not see him, he faced the Ka'ba, and raising both hands, invoked Allah saying the following prayers:

"O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, by your Sacred House in order. O our Lord, that they may offer prayer perfectly. So fill some hearts among men with love towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks." (Koran 14.37) Ishmael's mother went on suckling Ishmael and drinking from the water.

⁴ The first sentence in this story from the *hadith* is not included in the Norwegian version used in the study. That is why it is not included here. The omitted sentence that begins this story is: "The first lady to use a girdle was the mother of Ishmael. She used a girdle so that she might hide her tracks from Sarah" (CMJE 2008-2009).

When the water in the water-skin had all been used up, she became thirsty and her child also became thirsty. She started looking at him tossing in agony: She left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found that the mountain of Safa was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from Safa and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley like a person in distress and trouble, till she crossed the valley and reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and started looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not see anybody. She repeated that (running between Safa and Marwa) seven times."

The Prophet said, "This is the source of the tradition of the walking of the people between them (i.e. Safa and Marwa). When she reached the Marwa (for the last time) she heard a voice and she asked herself to be quiet and listened attentively. She heard the voice again and said, "O! You have made me hear your voice; have you got something to help me?" And behold! She saw an angel at the place of Zam-zam, digging the earth with his heel (or his wing), till water flowed from that place. She started to make something like a basin around it, using her hand in this way, and started filling her water-skin with water with her hands, and the water was flowing out after she had scooped some of it."

The Prophet added: "May Allah bestow Mercy on Ishmael's mother! Had she let the Zam-zam (flow without trying to control it), Zam-zam would have been a stream flowing on the surface of the earth." The Prophet further added: "Then she drank and suckled the child. The angel said to her, 'Don't be afraid of being neglected, for this is the House of Allah which will be built by this boy and his father, and Allah never neglects his people.' The House (i.e. Kaba) at that time was on a high place resembling a hillock, and when torrents came, they flowed to its right and left. She lived in that way till some people from the tribe of Jurhum or a family from Jurhum passed by her and her child, as they were coming through the way of Kada'. They landed in the lower

part of Mecca where they saw a bird that had the habit of flying around water and not leaving it. They said, 'This bird must be flying around water, though we know that there is no water in this valley.' They sent one or two messengers who discovered the source of water, and returned to inform them of the water. So, they all came." The Prophet added, "Ishmael's mother was sitting near the water. They asked her: 'Do you allow us to stay with you?' She replied, 'Yes, but you will have no right to possess the water.' They agreed to that. The Prophet further said, "Ishmael's mother was pleased with the whole situation as she used to love to enjoy the company of the people. So, they settled there, and later on they sent for their families who came and settled with them so that some families became permanent residents there. The child grew up and learnt Arabic from them and (his virtues) caused them to love and admire him as he grew up, and when he reached the age of puberty they made him marry a woman from amongst them.

The First Comments on the Hagar/Hajar Narratives

Rima (Arab-Norwegian, Roman Catholic) was the first to say something about the stories. She recalled a story about an angel who dug for water in the desert with its feet to rescue a nameless mother and child. Rima remembered being told this story during her childhood in the Middle East, without any Christian or Muslim connotations: it was just a story, and she found it beautiful. The Middle East's vast areas of desert make the search for water easy to understand. To be in the desert without any access to water is a potentially life-threatening situation, and to be responsible for a small child or to be a child in such a situation adds to the dramatic content of the story. An equally dramatic rescue by an angel who saves the human figures in the story from dying of thirst gives a happy, miraculous end. It is not difficult to see that this story may work as a bedtime story for children in the Middle East and that it may function as a cultural narrative beyond religious and confessional structures of meaning.

Aira (Pakistani-Norwegian, Sunni Muslim) recognized the stories as providing the narrative origin of the Zam-Zam well in Mecca, where Muslims drink water during *hajj* (the Islamic pil-

grimage to Mecca) when they perform the ritual of *sa'y*: they run back and forth between the heights of Safa and Marwa seven times to search for water in remembrance of Hajar's struggle (Esposito 2003: 103).

Rima and Aira thus reveal a pre-established relation to the narratives. Whereas Rima's pre-knowledge is that of a nameless mother and child, a miracle story from the desert, Aira has specific religious pre-knowledge of the narrative as the origin of the performance of *sa'y* in the Islamic tradition.

Some of the Christian participants had negative reactions to the narratives' contents. Inger (Norwegian, Lutheran Christian) called the story "terrible, when looked at with modern eyes." Inger explained that she thought so because she thought the story implied that women who were not mothers did not have dignity, that the text legitimized slavery, and that Hagar was expelled with her son to the desert. Inger called this latter point "the utmost brutality you can imagine." She also said that she found the *Hadith* narrative more substantial and vivid than the biblical text.

Susanne noted that Sarah was absent as a character in the *Hadith* text. She found that in some ways the *hadith* could represent a continuation of the Hagar narrative from the Bible when it tells about Hagar and Ishmael settling in the valley after they were rescued, an event not included in the biblical story. Rima, too, asked about the role of Sarah in the Islamic tradition in general. She asked if Islam saw Sarah as Jewish. Shirin answered by saying that in the Islamic tradition Abraham/Ibrahim was a Muslim.⁵ There was no further discussion on the religious status of Abraham/Ibrahim, Sarah, or the other shared characters in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic narratives about the family of Abraham/Ibrahim. Thus the conversation did not induce a discussion about religious *ownership* of the figures but

⁵ According to Islamic tradition, Abraham/Ibrahim was the first Muslim (Esposito 2003: 4). In the Koran, however, Abraham/Ibrahim is not called the first Muslim at first but *hanif*, which literally translated from Arabic means "God-friend" (Leirvik 2006: 42). To be a *hanif* implies being a monotheist, obedient to God, upright, and avoiding all kinds of polytheism (Esposito 2003: 108). In later koranic texts Abraham/Ibrahim is called the first Muslim (Leirvik 2006: 42).

rather helped to clarify different interpretations of the figures in the traditions, in particular regarding their possible different positions in the respective religious universes. Mapping these kinds of differences is important for further substantial communication and for creating a possible shared interpretative space.⁶

Eva found that the portrayal of Hagar in the two narratives differed greatly. In Eva's view, the biblical Hagar is portrayed as a woman who finally took charge of her situation, and she referred to Genesis 18:21 where Hagar is the one who finds Ishmael a wife. On the other hand, Eva claims that Hajar in the narrative from the *Hadith* is left completely in the hands of others. Eva further accuses the figure of Abraham/Ibrahim in *both* stories of being irresponsible and cruel to both Hagar/Hajar and Ishmael.

Eva's last comment in this introductory sequence touches on examples of *naming* related to Hagar/Hajar in the two narratives. In Genesis 16:13, Eva found what she characterized as an important incident in the biblical narrative: when Hagar gives God a name.⁷ She expresses surprise about this verse, and claims—on the basis of her own astonishment—to have noticed it for the first time, that the Christian tradition had in fact overlooked Hagar by focusing only on Sarah. She also stated that she was disturbed about her observation that Hajar was not mentioned by name in the text from the *Hadith*: she is simply called the mother of Ishmael.

*Discussion 1 on the Hagar/Hajar Narratives:
The Practice of Naming Women*

- Eva19: And I find it a bit typical that in the text from the *Hadith*, Hagar is not in charge.
- Eva20: Here you can see that she does not even have her name written in the text ... the Muslim tradition She is indicated in rela-

⁶ See chapter 2, pp. 23-25.

⁷ Genesis 16:13: "So she named the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi'; for she said, 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?'"

- tion to her son. It doesn't say Hagar, it says "the mother of Ishmael," doesn't it?
- Eva21: And, as a Western woman, it makes me a little upset to be called ... John's mother because of my relation to my son, and not Eva...
- Rima5: This has nothing to do with Islam. It is the tradition.
- Aira21: Yes.

Eva19 raises a question: When Eva claims that Hagar lacks status as an acting subject throughout the text from the *Hadith* and states that this is *typical*, to what is she referring? Does she mean typical of *Hadith* literature, of the Islamic canonical scriptures, or the entire Islamic tradition? Or is she referring to canonical religious scriptures in general, both Christian and Islamic? What she does mean by *typical* may indicate whether she is using the narrative from the *Hadith* as a negative contrast to the biblical story about Hagar—where she stated earlier that Hagar is described differently.

Eva20 suggests that she is concerned with the text from the *Hadith* and also that she may be referring to her own conception of the Islamic tradition in her argument. Her statement on Hagar's weak position is supported by an observation she made while reading the *Hadith* narrative: Hagar/Hajar's name is not used; rather, she is called "the mother of Ishmael" (Eva20). Eva's pre-knowledge and presuppositions about Islamic tradition seem to be part of her references when interpreting the text from the *Hadith*. The differences Eva claims to observe between the two Hagar/Hajar narratives in the portrayal of Hagar/Hajar is either deduced from Eva's presuppositions of the differences between the Islamic and the Christian traditions regarding women's position in general, or it is being used as a basis to claim this difference. The role of the text is thus either to function as a confirmation of Eva's presuppositions or else to serve as a suggestion to investigate if the position of women differs in the two traditions (generally).

Eva makes a self-reference about her interpretative position (Eva21). She refers to herself as a "Western woman"—a cultural and perhaps political but not religious reference. This

may suggest that she is using her cultural/political identity to confront this particular practice of naming, of which she explicitly says she does not approve. Her identification could imply suggesting a dichotomy between “the West” and “Islam” on the naming issue, and not one between “Christianity” and “Islam.”

Rima’s comment, however, states that naming women in relation to their children is a traditional practice rather than an Islamic religious custom (Rima5). Aira confirms this (Aira21). The separation of religion and tradition/culture as a possible way to analyze the naming, or rather the lack of naming, of Hajar in the text from the *Hadith* shifts the focus from Islam as the reason for this custom and addresses tradition and culture instead. Both Rima as a Christian and Aira as a Muslim make the same point. Rima’s cultural background from a Muslim majority country in the Middle East provides her with knowledge about Islam and the experience of distinguishing between Islam and Middle Eastern culture. Neither Rima nor Aira evaluate the different customs of naming women in their comments, so they do not reveal what they think about these practices. Instead, they suggest an analytical tool for the discussion: a distinction between Islam and tradition/culture in which the latter may or may not be influenced by Islam.

- Eva22: Yes, it’s tradition, but it’s written here, isn’t it? So, we can see the origin of the tradition, can’t we?
- Eva23: And not to have your own name is quite important.
- Eva24: And here, in the next sequence in the text it’s written, God says: “And when he had reached the top, where they could not see him, he turned towards the Ka’ba, lifted both hands to Allah and said this prayer: ‘Lord, I have settled a part of my offspring in a valley where nothing grows’.”
- Eva25: This does not include Hagar, “offspring” ... he settled his son there, not Hagar.
- Shirin16: Everything belongs to him, both wife and son.
- Eva26: Yes, but she is not mentioned.

Aira22: Excuse me. In the Koran it says *ahli*. That means family, and that is both wife and children. It does not say so here.

Eva turns the argument made by Rima and Aira around in Eva22. She suggests that the tradition of naming women in relation to their children may originate from the *Hadith*—as part of the Islamic canonical tradition. This questions the relation between cultural versus religious roots of traditional practices, and Eva may comprehend that the relation between Islam and the cultural tradition is more complex than Rima and Aira see it, both of whom distinguished rather sharply between Islam and tradition in this respect. But Eva is not exploring a possible complexity around the origin of this practice of naming women. She is connecting the custom of naming women in relation to their children with Islam because of how she perceived the text from the *Hadith*.

The underlying question is how one can distinguish between religion and tradition/culture. Since culture and religion are often intertwined in social practice and may mutually legitimize each other's practices, it is difficult to distinguish between them on a general basis. Religion may be seen to be opposed to culture or to parts of cultural practice, or the two areas may be seen as complementary fields with no real mutual friction between them. The religious believer may identify herself arbitrarily with culture or religion or enhance the significance of culture and/or religion by referring to herself as "Western" or "Christian," as "Arab" or "Muslim," as "Western" and "Muslim," or as "Arab" and "Christian." It is necessary to analyze the context further if we want to know if the use of cultural or religious categories in naming oneself and others carries a specific significance. How one identifies oneself in a discussion, however, might suggest which discourse it is one relates to at different times, given that there are several discourses present that provide room for a choice. As mentioned above, when Eva identifies herself as a Western woman and the object of her criticism is defined as part of Islam, the probable line of conflict is drawn between the categories of the West and Islam, rather than between Christianity and Islam.

Eva23 underlines the importance of "having your own name" in a negative way. "Having your own name" is asserted

over against being named in relation to one's own child, which then would mean *not* having one's own name. For Eva, having a name of one's own thus seems to mean that the name refers to a person as an individual, with no reference to relationships or kinship.⁸

The question of who is naming the children in relation to whom the mother is subsequently named is not raised. If one names one's own child, this would be an indirect way of naming oneself. If a relative or society names the child, they then indirectly name the parent of the child. The focus in the discussion is, however, not so much on the practices of naming but on the right to be addressed by others by a personal name and how to assess the practice of being named in relation to one's child. So far in the discussion, this is dealt with as exclusively a women's issue.

In Eva24 Eva moves into the broader area of patriarchal family structures she identifies in the text from the *Hadith*. The sequence she quotes is the one verse from the Koran that is cited in this narrative, and thus it has a different status in the Islamic tradition from the rest of this text. Eva is critical with respect to how she perceives Abraham/Ibrahim talking about his family. She argues that he did not even mention Hagar/Hajar in this verse. Here she may implicitly be continuing a comparison between the biblical Hagar narrative and the text from the *Hadith*, adding arguments for her comprehension of the *Hadith* as a text where Hagar/Hajar is portrayed as being less in charge of her own and her son's destiny than in the biblical text.

Both Shirin and Aira argue that what was meant in the text was that Hagar/Hajar was included in Abraham's declaration about his family (Shirin16, Aira22). Aira criticizes the translation in the Norwegian version of the *Hadith* that was read in the group for causing this misunderstanding. She provides the Arabic term used in the koranic text (since this is a verse from the Koran), which means "family" to correct the translation "offspring."⁹ At the next meeting, however (Meeting 3), Aira cor-

⁸ The discussion is about the cultural practice of using a person's personal first name versus being named in terms of one's children. Last names or family names are not mentioned.

⁹ In the Norwegian translation of the *hadith*: *avkom*.

rected her own statement. She had checked the koranic verse in the meantime and found that the word in the Koran was not the Arabic word for family, as she had suggested, but the word for offspring, as it had been translated. She stated this in her first contribution at the next meeting but claimed that this did not change her overall perspective of the text. She argues, however, that this does not in any way mean that the text or Ibrahim means to ignore Hajar. She points to Ibrahim's prayer in the koranic verse in the *Hadith* narrative as an expression of concern for both Hajar and Ishmael.

Shirin¹⁶ perceives the patriarchal perspective of the tradition in a different way. Shirin explains that Abraham is to be regarded as the "family owner" of both Hagar/Hajar and Ishmael. This includes Hagar/Hajar as part of his property. Shirin's point, however, is that Hagar was not *excluded*.

The discussion now moved into what became Discussion 2, but Maria later went back to the discussion on the practice of naming women. She introduces a new perspective:

- Maria7: For me, when I read both these texts, I thought that very little has changed between those times and ours.
- Maria8: The only difference is that things are more formal.
- Maria9: I believe that the difficulty of not having any children still bothers women.
- Maria10: Just that today it's possible to have access to the technology So you can ... You don't need a man to have a child today.
- Maria11: But it's also that ... this is very interesting for me because there's a lot of tradition. Because when I read this, it could have been written from some of my places in Africa.
- Maria12: It's just right: if a woman is married and has no children, they find another woman for the man for him to have children. So this is a current topic today, not only at that time.
- Maria13: And good technology has arrived, then it gets fixed with technology, and as I said it is a little

Maria14: And what Eva brought up, that she is named in relation to her son ... to me this is a joy when someone calls me in relation to my daughter because I'm They call me ma-ma Isabel, then I feel very proud.

Maria finds that the temporal gap between the historical contexts of the texts and present contexts does not automatically imply that significant changes have taken place. The text from the Bible and that from the *Hadith* differ in their respective historical contexts as well as in their time of origin, but Maria does not reflect on this difference when fusing the times of the texts together as "those times." The different cultural, historical, and religious contexts of the texts are thus underexposed as Maria constructs a common time for the two texts. Her main aim is to show the *similarities* between "those times" and "our time" concerning the position of women as connected to the social expectation of having children. The latter could be interpreted as "now" but perhaps also as "in our lifetime," going beyond the exact present. The issue of childlessness is part of the theme of the Genesis narrative but does not connect immediately with the text from the *Hadith*.

If the perspective of time in Maria's interpretation is simplified into the categories of "then" and "now," she constructs two different time categories in her statements. While recognizing them as different times, Maria still merges them by presenting the fact that barrenness for women today is still a problematic in exactly in the same way that it was in the Genesis text. But the new perspective she includes is loaded with experiences from another geographical location than the immediate Norwegian context. A man is allowed or expected to turn to another woman if his wife is barren in order to ensure that he has children—just as Abraham did in the Genesis narrative. Maria states that "they," without further specification, would find him another woman, thus describing it as a social and cultural act in the African context, rather than an individual one, to which she is referring (Maria12).

Maria extends the geographical and cultural area in view, merging the "then" and the "now" of the African contexts mentioned (Maria11). Through her use of spatial references she may be expressing her view that the *place* where a woman lives is

more crucial for her life than the *times* in which she lives. In her use of the category of time, “then” and “now” merge, but her spatial perspective visualizes a difference that is already there but has not been articulated until now.

The technology mentioned as a solution for childless women in Maria¹⁰ emphasizes this point. Technology of this kind is not available for everyone at a global level. This creates a spatial as well as social division between women who have access to this technology and those who do not.

Maria does not apply the observed temporal merging between “then” and “now”—brought about through similarities between the African context and the historical context of the Hagar/Hajar narratives—in the same way to contexts outside Africa. The Norwegian context is not mentioned. The temporal merging expresses Maria’s view of the relation between the Hagar/Hajar narratives and the African context to which she refers: they are closely related on social and cultural issues concerning the naming of women and women’s status as parents. The interpretative or meaning-making problem Maria addresses is thus related to a gap between places or contexts, between African contexts and, for instance, Norway, and between the Norwegian context and the biblical text.

Maria’s temporal and spatial meaning making creates a new interpretation of the past represented in the texts through accenting a current context geographically distant. By connecting the African context to the Hagar/Hajar narratives, she brings the past (“then”) closer to the here and now.

The view of historical evolutionism, which is basically that the historical development of all cultures and societies follow the same pattern, and that cultures are evaluated by the extent to which they have embraced Western modernity, could also lump the pre-modern times of the biblical text and the African context together in one category. Johannes Fabian criticizes social/historical evolutionism for being ethnocentric and for denying coevalness and thus equality between people living in different cultures (Fabian 1983: 17, 30-31). But this is hardly what Maria intends in this sequence. Social/historical evolutionism and its categorizations of other cultures often portray the “then” and “there” as one-dimensional times/places—constructing an image of the people living in such times/spaces as infer-

ior to the here/now, with the West as the epistemological center. Maria does not seem to mention the African context she speaks about as an example of the “distant” as *inferior*. Her message can be taken as an attempt to bring the realities of a distant context (“there”) into the space of “here” in order to signify experiences from other places in the here and now. Maria displays an interpretative position as being multi-located and uses this to challenge the presupposition that Norway or the West is the only (or the central) interpretative context for the Hagar narrative.¹⁰

Finally, Maria addresses the issue of naming women in relation to their children (Maria14). One of the problems of a childless woman in, for example, an African context as described by Maria may be that she had no children in relation to whom she could be named, so her childlessness would be confirmed every time her name was mentioned and in her self-presentation. In this way a woman’s status with respect to motherhood and naming are linked together. It could be that this is exactly what a man must avoid through arranging a new partner if the present female partner does not produce children (Maria12). If a proper name in this context is linked with being a parent, to ensure a proper name for a man seems to be more important than doing so for a woman.

Against the background of Maria’s descriptions of the consequences of childlessness for an African woman, the problems presented by Eva earlier (connected with being named in relation to one’s children) are put in a different perspective. Maria does show that she perceives the custom of being named in relation to her children quite differently from how Eva does (Maria14). Instead of interpreting this as depriving her of a “name” of her own, she expresses joy and pride over being included in this custom.

¹⁰ Kwok Pui-Lan uses the expression “diasporic consciousness” as a skill that reveals dominant discourses in a feminist postcolonial based criticism of the notions of “center” and “periphery” as they are displayed in these discourses. She emphasizes that the multiple location of a diasporic female subject creates a need to negotiate contexts, and that this may situate her in a position to be able to decenter the center (Kwok 2005: 44-51).

In the further conversation, Maria refers to the process of naming as "traditional." Naming a person is part of a broader tradition for Maria, and even if her further example of a tradition is African, she does not exclude other practices of naming as "not traditional." Maria's argument extends the discussion of naming from concentrating on cultural tradition and religion in Islamic and Muslim practice to including African customs of naming. She does not mention religiously motivated traditions or religion in her contribution. Through this the religious element in the discussion is supplied with a cultural perspective on the tradition. "Tradition" is introduced as something distinct from religion, at least it appears this way in the discussion.

In the discussion so far, the notion of tradition is used only concerning the practice of naming a woman after her child's name, not for the practice of addressing a woman by her personal first name. Tradition is thus connected to the African practice Maria describes and to the practice in the *Hadith*, connected to a practice in Muslim communities at the time of origin of the *Hadith* text. A direct religious legitimization of this practice in Islam is denied. Nevertheless, the spatial and temporal space of this particular practice of naming is described as being in the "then" of the *Hadith*, the "now and there" in Africa and not in the "then" of the biblical text about Hagar or in the "here and now" of the Norwegian context.

Maria expresses herself in a way that may reflect both closeness and distance toward the practice of naming that she claims is "traditional." She includes herself in an African "we," while at the same time noting that the traditional naming of women implies that a woman's "own name" is never used. What is a woman's "real" name in a context where she is named in relation to her children? For Maria, it seems that she refers to a woman's "own name" here as her first name. She might be putting it that way because she views the issue in that way, but it may also be because she wants to be understood by the others. If the latter, this might indicate that Maria relates to what she perceives to be a dominant discourse in the group, and this would be a discourse where the immediate interpretation of what the "real" name of a woman was is her first name. Maria may have internalized the perspective of looking at oneself and one's own background from a dominant Western per-