Re-theorising namûs *beyond* 'honour': self-making, feminist agency and global epistemic justice

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Abstract

Namûs describes a 'way of life' integral to Kurdish sociality and to the sense of self for many Kurds who live it in a plurality of ways. Constituting a form of power over the subject which can potentially take the form of domination, namûs is also a social relation of care and power between subjects and is integral to its subject's ethical relationship of self-to-self and processes of *self-making*. Post-Enlightenment and liberal frameworks of 'modern' selfhood, however, have tended to render namûs equivalent to 'honour' and 'honour-based violence' ('HBV'). Through this act of mistranslation, a life with namûs is constructed as violent, unworthy, racially inferior and harmful to women. Building upon multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in North Kurdistan, Turkey and Denmark, this article originally theorises namûs as a practice of ethical *self-making* that is epistemic, dignified and agentic in all its complexities. Women living with and through namûs actively work to cultivate this way of *being*, thereby interrupting the epistemic authority of liberal feminism. Namûs, this article argues, cannot be understood through blanket explanations of 'crime', 'oppression' and 'patriarchy', as the discourse on 'honour' would suggest. Breaking away from these injurious portrayals is, therefore, vital to realise global epistemological justice.

Keywords

agency, epistemic justice, ethics, honour, honour-based violence, international human rights, namûs, self-making

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Introduction

During the Spring and Summer of 2019, I spent several months conducting multi-sited ethnographic research with Kurdish people living a life of namûs.[1] This article centres around those encounters to shed light upon the social life of namûs as it is lived, experienced, inhabited and reasoned about for and by Kurdish women. My ethnography centred on the geographies known as the Kurdish homeland (Amed/Diyarbakir), as well as among the internally displaced Kurds in Turkey (İzmir), and some of the European Kurdish diaspora (Denmark). Reflecting on the different modalities of inhabiting the norms to which women of namûs are subjected, the ethnographic interlocutors reveal the centrality of self-making practices in be(com)ing namûs. Such processes of self-making, this article argues, are not passive but a site of agency, providing their subjects with a number of capacities and resources, as well as motivating certain modes of acting, speaking and being.

'What is namûs?'. To provide a precise description of what namûs entails is a complicated matter for three reasons that are significant to feminist theorising. First, namûs has been made equivalent to 'honour' and 'honour-based violence' ('HBV') through processes of mistranslation. Such universalising discourses have written over the social and cultural specificity of namûs, causing epistemic injustice to its subjects/practitioners. Second, namûs is embodied in a vast plurality of ways which render definition complex and at times contradictory. Third, and following on from the aforementioned plurality, any effort to pin namûs down is potentially violent, both theoretically and at phenomenological and epistemic levels, for those who live with and through namûs. That said, in a schematic sense, as my interlocutors demonstrate below, namûs often entails techniques of self-restraint, hospitality, self-examined bodily comportment and chastity in the pursuit of virtues ranging from propriety and honesty to trustworthiness, integrity, generosity and respect. Living with and by namûs means being in relations of care, responsibility and (often) accountability to one's family, community and self. Kurdishness extends beyond namûs, but it is a 'way of life' that is significant to a sense of self for many Kurdish people (Foucault, 1990; Baxter, 2007; Mahmood, 2012). As namûs presupposes an unbounded sense of self, the subject of namûs exists in *being-with*, and in relation to, others. Namûs is a social form of relationality and interdependence that resonates with what Suad Joseph calls the 'fluid' self (1993: 453–454).

This understanding of namûs is well described, in a very preliminary sense, with some help from Rojda, a young woman I interviewed in Amed/Diyarbakir.[2] Rojda told me how she 'stands on her own two feet' and 'knows how to run a house', something which makes her feel like an empowered young woman. Expressing a well-articulated view of what namûs encompasses, she declared that namûs is about 'hak yemeyeceksin', which in Turkish means 'to not attribute to oneself what someone else deserves'. Namûs, for Rojda, is a matter of being honest, and not cheating, lying or tricking others. For many women like Rojda namûs was expressed through a set of entangled emotions that involved gendered virtues, normalised hierarchies and a deep form of social relationality. Within this normatively ambivalent field of social relationality, many women negotiated their social ties and subject positions in a way that avoided

any severe questioning of the moral significance and importance of the norms and virtues of namûs. My research finds that even when women felt ambivalent towards namûs and could see there were other ways of being and relating available to them, they nonetheless committed to it critically because of the greater ethical obligation of namûs and thus in maintaining the kind of world (intersubjective and ethical relations) it calls forth.

The experiences of women living with namûs have been marginalised against the backdrop of the dominant narratives and mistranslations of namûs-as-'honour' and 'HBV'. This mistranslation has generated a false equivalence between 'honour' and 'HBV', particularly within the meaning-making power of international human rights and the United Nations (UN) documents and reporting on 'honour'/'HBV' (Cetinkaya, 2023). Although the concern for 'honour'/'HBV' was flagged in 1984 as a 'harmful tradition', it did not get much attention until the 1990s when gender violence was put on the UN's agenda, leading to a proliferation of discourse on 'honour'/'HBV' (Connors, 2005). This reporting accelerated in intensity and fervour after 9/11, as the fight against 'honour'/'HBV' became entangled with imperial state projects and Islamophobia on a global scale (Grewal, 2013; Abu-Lughod, 2015; Volpp, 2019; Abu-Lughod et al., 2023). As a result, 'honour'/'HBV' is associated with the region of the Middle East and its racialised diaspora communities who have historically been othered (Abu-Lughod et al., 2023; Cetinkaya, 2023).

The use of the name 'honour' serves as an empty signifier and an umbrella term that covers a wide variety of practices within human rights discourse and beyond (Grewal, 2013). The mistranslation of namûs to 'honour'/'HBV' renders namûs equivalent to the forms of violence that go under the name of 'HBV'. It further reinforces epistemic and material inequalities, as the provincial idiom of namûs is erased along with its plurality of meanings, to be translated into the universal and static name of 'honour'. Namûs defies generalisation – it must be theorised on its own terms, even if its conceptual exploration challenges dominant paradigms of knowledge and judgement. By attending to namûs within its own temporal, spatial and historical contexts, the world and self of namûs can be studied in all its dimensions: emotional, embodied and social. In doing so, this article attends to how self-making with and in namûs is fundamentally agentic – both in terms of acts of self-cultivation as well as through the act of giving an account of oneself, thus challenging the 'action-bias' that undergirds our received ideas of feminist agency (Madhok, 2013). Shadowed by the epistemic authority of human rights and liberal feminism, theories of feminist agency are 'heavily complicit in the transnational politics of judgementalism, which [have] been so prolific in pronouncing on the quality, degree, and nature of agency and also rights enjoyed by women in the "third world"' (Madhok, 2020: 400).

Against this backdrop, the significance of engaging with namûs, I argue, is fourfold. First, reclaiming namûs-as-namûs provides an embodied, gendered and historical account of the subjectivity of those living with namûs. Such an approach is enabled by the epistemological and embodied positionality of the ethnographic interlocutors and the researcher, all of whom are located in the world of namûs in different ways. This allows the standpoint of such marginalised ways of understanding namûs to be foregrounded. Second, this counter-narrative is a form of 'talking back' to the authority of

international human rights and feminist liberal discourse – questioning the location and position of privileged knowers who recount women's experiences through transcendent, universal and homogenous modes of articulation (Spivak, 1988; Bannerjee, 2020). Third, the researcher's positionality, combined with the theoretical commitment to reclaiming namûs-as-namûs, opens the possibility for greater 'conceptual diversity' (Madhok, 2020: 403) and theory building from within geopolitical locations different from the Euro-American world and its episteme. Finally, attending to namûs and its modes of embodied inhabitation across different locations reveals the nature of its adaptability and resilience as a set of norms. As such, it reveals how namûs figures both homeland and diasporic subjectivities in divergent ways. This article contributes towards global epistemic justice as it elucidates the onto-epistemological aspect of namûs and how as an embodied and lively concept it 'makes up' people and their world (Hacking, 2002).

Based upon self-interpretations of namûs, gleaned from my ethnographic interlocutors, this article originally theorises namûs as entailing agentic practices of self-making which are both epistemic and ethical. Such practices require of women that they cultivate and embody the virtues and norms of namûs. Namûs, like all ethical orders, entails a dual temporality of being both a (disciplinary) discursive order and an (empowering) ethical practice of self-making. It is the ethical dimension of namûs as a form of self-governance, of having power-over-oneself, that I focus on here as it offers us a novel insight into why women willingly live up to the commands of namûs. In short, this article discloses what namûs achieves in the making of the gendered Kurdish subject.

In the following section, I offer some epistemological and methodological reflections, before briefly examining how namûs has been made sensible in contemporary feminist scholarship. Taking at face value the narratives of my situated interlocutors, this research seeks to move beyond the dichotomy of resistance/repression that frames the relation between women and their cultural norms. Instead, I demonstrate how inhabiting namûs is complex and at times contradictory but is, nonetheless, a considered practice which is experienced to be meaningful and valuable by *many* (not all) of the women who live with and through it. Approaching namûs through such a lens serves to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon and to open up a space for feminist theorising to engage more holistically and compassionately with the concept of namûs and its gendered life-worlds on its own terms.

Epistemic and methodological reflections

This research adopts ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviews, across three sites. My research began in Amed (Diyarbakir), a city that is considered the Kurdish capital of North Kurdistan and which has been the greatest space of antagonism against the Turkish state. I also lived with women in İzmir, a town in the West of Turkey with a large population of Kurdish migrants, many of whom were relocated in recent years due to forced migration as a result of the conflict between the state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Yeğen, 2011). Finally, I worked with women in the Kurdish community in the greater Copenhagen area of Denmark, where a diaspora has developed following the migration waves in the 1960s and 1970s of predominantly

skilled and unskilled labour from central Turkey. The Danish state has actively promoted social policies that have racialised and sought to put immense pressure on 'honour' and the lives of those who identify with namûs. Across the three sites, I conducted over one hundred interviews examining the social life of namûs.

This article critically examines namûs subjects, exploring their emotional attachment to it, and its bestowal of capacities, resources and meaning, whilst also understanding its intrinsic value and existential significance. Consequently, the 'active social life' (Abu-Lughod, 2010) of namûs – including its ethical self-to-self and self-to-other relations – is theorised and mapped out. What I propose here is both a counter-narrative to the view that namûs is equivalent to 'honour'/'HBV' and therefore violent, as well as a novel analytical approach to understanding namûs that can attend to and sit with its normative ambivalence.

Engaging with the everyday of namûs allows us to break with the epistemic injustices that render it intelligible as an equivalent of or synonym for 'HBV'. I anticipate that many feminists would argue that there is an issue with the notion of the 'everyday', insofar as violence against women is widespread and the reality for a lot of women on a daily basis. On this point, I share such concerns and understand their motivations (I return to this problem of everyday violence at the end of this section). The meaning of the 'everyday' in this study, however, refers more precisely to a 'way of life'—which exists outside of 'HBV'. Phenomenologically rich accounts of namûs demonstrate the significance of living with and through it, as well as the sense of belonging and identity it provides. By attending to namûs as an ethical 'way of life', this research attends to the processes through which subjects *make* themselves through namûs.

At stake in this article is not a defence of namûs, nor a romanticisation of this way of life. Writing as a Kurdish woman who was born in the Kurdish diaspora in Denmark, and who grew up within a culture where namûs played an integral role in our practices of sociality and care, I, like all the women I spoke with about namûs during my fieldwork, know that it is gendered, unequal and patriarchal in its structure. In this article, however, I seek to analytically hold open a space to inquire into the productive elements of the ethical order of namûs outside of the law-making violence that marks its limits. Whilst namûs may be (mis)used to provide the cultural authority to demand forms of violence, namûs is not the same thing as that violence. Namûs has a social life outside of incidents of violence, such that for most women who live in and through namûs, they do so without relating it to personal or subjective forms of violence.

This article methodologically brackets the imperative to condemn the practice of namûs. It does so for two reasons. The first is scholarly in nature: I am interested in understanding namûs in a non-moralised way. Focusing on the social life of such an ideal, this research examines the productive elements of namûs in the constitution of the self. The second is political and epistemic in concern: I refuse to assume a position in which I take on the authority and right to speak normatively about namûs, a way of life that is immanent to the sense of self, the desires and social values of millions of women who take pride in and gain social standing and self-worth from having and living with namûs.

In *Decolonizing Universalism*, Khader (2019) develops a critique of the anti-normativity stance found in the work of Mahmood (2012) and Abu-Lughod (1986,

2015), which I, by the same token, have furthered. Khader's anti-imperial feminist stand-point is premised upon a non-ideal universalism that is 'justice enhancing' through its commitment to opposing sex oppression. As such, she argues that feminist theory requires some perspective from which it can critique practices situated in the Muslim world that are, however, sensitive to the dangers of neo-imperialism – latent in some forms of Eurocentric and missionary feminisms. On this issue, I agree in part with Khader, who offers us important tools for confronting injustice and gendered inequalities. It is fundamental that we leave open spaces to think and appreciate forms of struggle and resistance against practices that are a source of domination in the lives of people. Kurdish feminism has a long history of resisting patriarchy (Mojab and Hassanpour, 2003: 60), and many of the women I lived and worked alongside during my fieldwork were engaged in or had family members involved with this movement, and most of them maintained a critical ethical relation to namûs. I depart from Khader's compelling position, however, insofar as it maintains a commitment to a mode of universalist normative judgement that places theoretico-political limits upon achieving epistemic justice.[3] I take this view, not to say that I personally as a Kurdish feminist do not have my own normative position on the norms that shaped my own subjectivity in part, but rather because I see the place for critique and the transformation of namûs to be the task of the women living with and through namûs as they strive to live a life according to their own desires and needs.

Mapping the discourse on *namûs*-as-'honour' and -'HBV'

In mapping the discourse on namûs, I demonstrate how the approaches and questions asked about namûs and its subjects focus on the transgression of norms as a route to 'HBV'. As critical feminist theorists, we must, however, maintain the distinctions between 'honour', 'HBV' and namûs – not just for conceptual clarity but also due to the radically different phenomenological and world-making experiences that women have in relation to each of those terms and the practices they name. To this end, I am inspired by scholars writing critically about 'honour' such as Abu-Lughod (1986, 2015), Grewal (2013), Volpp (2019), Baxter (2007), Razack (2004) and Koğacıoğlu (2004, 2011), as they have sought to question the racialised representations of 'honour', the rendering of patriarchy to the 'Other' and the biopolitical management implicit in and integral to the governance of 'honour'/'HBV'. Additionally, and central to my argument, I draw on Abu-Lughod (1986, 2015), Mahmood (2012) and Baxter's (2007) work on the question of selfhood and agency within structures of hierarchy and authority that nonetheless provides certain resources to the subject within historically specific relations.

Scholars writing about the Kurdish context have emphasised how namûs (referred to as 'honour' or 'HBV' in this literature) pertains to women's burden to maintain the family and community's purity. The findings of these studies have been that these women's sexuality and conduct are controlled through cultural practices which have the potential to become violent (Mojab and Hassanpour, 2003; Begikhani, 2005; King, 2008; Wikan, 2008; Gill, 2013; Begikhani and Gill, 2015; Tas-Cifci, 2019). Namûs-as-'honour' thus

names the limits of what is or is not acceptable behaviour, placing the onus on women to tread carefully so as to not transgress its norms. Common for these aforementioned scholars across various academic disciplines is their emphasis upon how 'honour' and namûs are gendered, implicated in asymmetrical power relations, related to norms of propriety and expressed through the feminine body which is understood as the 'inscriptional space' (Butler, 1993) of patriarchal norms and ideals. As namûs is conceived of as an external imposition on women, it is described as restricting their agency or freedom. The distinction between agency and the liberal political ideal of freedom is often conflated through such narratives (Mahmood, 2012; Madhok, 2013). As a result, women's relationship to namûs is often expressed in one of two ways: either in terms of women as 'powerless' and dominated by 'namûs', or in terms of women reacting to power and resisting its norms and social authority (Mohanty, 1984).

King (2008) frames her anthropological understanding of namûs through the theory of patrilineal sovereignty. She argues that namûs allows patrilineal kinships (both families and states) to exercise power and control over the composition, resources and boundaries of the community, as well as the use of violence therein. Similarly, Tas-Cifci's (2019) studies of the Kurdish diaspora in the UK describe namûs as being tied to the protection of 'collectivist culture' in multicultural contexts. In this regard, it is often argued that 'traditions are strengthened' in the diaspora (Wikan, 2008: 69) as part of an anti-assimilation strategy for those living with namûs, and in response to the hostile and racial environments of these nation-states.

In Turkey, namûs has been represented by the state as a Kurdish or 'Eastern' problem, perpetuating issues of non-'modernity' when it comes to marginalised and racialised people, as Koğacioğlu (2011) has argued. It is through state-designed models of cultural 'development' (internal colonisation) that Kurdish and other minorities within Turkey can reach the image of an ideal citizenship and a certain 'modern' notion of 'Turkishness' that can overcome namûs (Koğacioğlu, 2004, 2011). Similarly, in Denmark, 'honour' is cast as a form of 'negative social control' that is prevalent in what is coined 'non-Western immigrant' communities, reinforcing a 'culture battle' between Denmark and its racialised (Muslim) communities (Rytter and Pedersen, 2013; Galal and Leibmann, 2020). Namûs-as-'honour', as it emerges, is represented in racialised terms (Razack, 2004), and often explained as a means for people to protect their community, essentially constituting a form of 'auto-immunity' (Derrida, 2002) from threats (both internal and external). On this basis alone, the battle to epistemically reclaim namûs is important and has material implications for women's lives both within the diaspora and in North Kurdistan and Turkey.

Arising from the select survey of the literature on namûs, it is clear that namûs is often inegalitarian in its practice and that it has normalised a number of hierarchies (according to sex and age). Further, namûs, in its structuring of social relations, maintains an exclusive interest in that which is Kurdish and a disinterested suspicion of that which is other. It also constitutes a marker of cultural difference and incompatibility between countries such as Turkey and Denmark and their racialised minority communities. When namûs is placed in an antagonistic relationship with any non-namûs-based forms of life (Wikan, 2008; Danneskiold-Samsøe et al., 2019), however, this perpetuates an image

of namûs as a 'crime of culture' (Grewal, 2013). Namûs and 'honour' are primarily linked to tradition and cultures, but as a phenomenon it stands at the intersection of multiple 'modern' political and social dynamics, including feminism and human rights emancipatory projects, Islamophobia and biopolitics (Koğacioğlu, 2004; Abu-Lughod, 2015; Farris, 2017; Volpp, 2019; Cetinkaya, 2023).

Building upon Abu-Lughod's (1986) understanding of 'honour' as a moral code, Baxter (2007) has developed an anthropological account of 'honour' in Arab societies, framing it as a discourse of 'living' that has a strong sense of the 'right' or 'proper'. In this largely overlooked article, Baxter, working ethnographically and in the context of the Palestinian West Bank, goes further than any of the contemporary authors on 'honour', in attending to the ways in which 'honour' entails notions of 'self' and 'agency' that enable 'rights/claims/privileges' for women (2007: 738). Baxter's analysis seeks to move beyond the epistemic and conceptual limits of what she calls the 'honour-as-problem-for-women-and-progress' paradigm, and to describe how 'women's agency and subjectivity is embedded within and a reflection of structural, ideological, and experiential configurations, rather than as resistances to them' per se (2007: 739). My analysis of namûs in this regard is indebted to Baxter's essay, and the shifts in focus and epistemic frameworks that she effects therein. Extending her approach to 'honour', though working within a different discipline and tradition of theorising, I depart from Baxter's account in two ways. I do not view 'honour' as an ideology (Barrett, 1991), nor do I view it as simply a site of male authority and responsibility that women 'negotiate', preferring the Foucauldian grammar of discourse and fluid power relations instead. As Baxter (2007: 765) notes, to transpose an analysis of 'honour ideology' developed in the Palestinian context to other (Arab) societies and cultures is not appropriate nor helpful. In this regard, I examine both the capacities that namûs endows upon its subjects, and how women reason about their attachment to this ethical form of life as they create harmony between the social authority of namûs and their self, in the context of Kurdish sociality.

Self-narration, techniques of embodiment and namûs

In this section, I turn to the ethnographic materiality of namûs, to explore the empirical character of the subject of namûs. These accounts reveal the sometimes inconsistent and overlapping ways that agents make sense of their experiences, values and desires shaped in and through the discourses of namûs. The self-narrations that follow are by Berîvan (Amed/Diyarbakir), Rojda (Amed/Diyarbakir) and Dîlan (Copenhagen), three women in their mid-to-late twenties who are university educated.[4] Whilst Rojda and Berîvan are both unmarried and have grown up in a politicised environment influenced by the Kurdish struggle, Dîlan is a second-generation Kurdish migrant affected by the political environment of xenophobia in Denmark. They each reveal, in different ways, how namûs has a social and ethical value for them and how they engage in certain stylistic practices in order to train their bodies to be in a state of namûs.

It is worth noting that my ethnographic interlocutors have mixed emotions in relation to the norms of namûs. They are not uncritical of namûs but they nonetheless have a

relationship to it, and thereby further its practices and techniques knowingly. They have a commitment to the ethical order (as the 'right way of living') which is vital for their situated sense of self. Whilst they are from different locations, they are not meant to be representative of these sites in any exemplary, generalised or ideal-typical sense. Rather, they each in their own particularity demonstrate the integral role that namûs plays in the constitution of the self, through a process of mediation between social norms and personal ethics. Although namûs is a transnational phenomenon, the fact that it is tied to subject-formation means that its territorial location mattered less in individuals' accounts of namûs than I had anticipated. Location nonetheless did shape subjects' narration of their relationship to namûs, particularly when having namûs became a marker for their cultural difference within the diaspora. Across all sites, there were different ways of being namûs, but these depended upon the person's subject-position within rich and diverse social relationships and life experiences, as well as on age and generational factors too.

Berîvan, a young woman in her late twenties, began her account of namûs by affirming its omnipresence in all aspects of her existence. Adopting a feminist disposition to namûs, something that is shaped by her political consciousness and derived from the stance taken by the PKK, Berîvan distinguished her own understanding of namûs from that of society. The norms of namûs set the parameters for Berîvan's subjectivity and she has developed an ethical relationship to namûs insofar as she is cultivating 'dürüstlük', that is, virtues of 'authenticity', 'integrity' and doing what is 'good' (both for herself and for others, as these are not necessarily separate). Berîvan is, however, very sceptical of the societal understanding of namûs as a gendered phenomenon and its concern with the female body's visibility and purity: 'the namûs they think of is not only for women'. Berîvan takes issue with how namûs places unequal social pressures on women as compared to men, especially when it comes to bodily comportment and the shaping of one's expressive ways of being. Whilst Berîvan dresses modestly and wears the hijab, embodying in that context the feminine virtues of shyness, chastity and innocence, these virtues are not in her view linked to the societal understanding of namûs and its concern with purity. Berîvan thus rearticulates an account of namûs in terms which are more 'true' to who she is and how she wants to be.

Berîvan expresses how she thinks differently from society but that she has to 'ayak udurma' (Turkish: to walk in the stream with the others and follow social conventions). More precisely, 'ayak udurma' in translation means to 'align one's feet' or 'to keep in step'. This militaristic metaphor suggests that a degree of disciplinary power is involved. As it is a disciplinary power that is undertaken with and in relation to others, there is some sense of community in this kind of self-disciplining. It is something you do with other people to shape your body, emotions and desires in line with an ethical discourse. On the one hand, Berîvan sees society as a coercive power; on the other, she sees value in the personal and ethical adherence to namûs. Some of these norms and virtues are part of her sense of self in composite and often selective ways. To be critical of and yet adhere to namûs still points to a kind of relationship between the discourse and the self. One does not necessarily need a *positive* relationship to namûs, but reflecting upon, cultivating and ethically transforming oneself in accordance with the norms and

virtues is to be aware of one's own obligations in relation to particular commands of namûs.

The dual conception that Berîvan holds becomes particularly visible as she tells me about an incident with a male colleague who she was hanging out with in her free time and who had also met Berîvan's boyfriend. This male colleague commented upon Berîvan's desire not to spend time alone with him, and the fact that she had a boyfriend. He had said to other colleagues about her: 'if I knew she was a girl like that …', indicating that she was not a 'good girl', or that she was lacking namûs. This colleague talking about her in these terms, and doing so behind her back, annoyed and hurt Berîvan. She was upset that other people did not challenge him on what he said, as she told me: 'I didn't do something bad according to the concept of namûs in society, and when it comes to my own concept of namûs, I really didn't do anything wrong either'. We can see here how Berîvan negotiates the two forms of namûs most clearly. Berîvan struggles with namûs insofar as her sense of ethical selfhood is located between multiple levels of inter-pretation and social knowledge. Berîvan's various ways of interpreting the world (some social, some personal) are mediated against one another and in (at times) inconsistent or overlapping ways as she makes sense of her experiences, values and desires: moving between a generalised social conception of namûs and her own ethical sense of self. In this way, the moral-ethical subjectivity that Berîvan develops with herself is one that seeks to accomplish a transformation with *some* of herself as an object and aligns with *some* aspects of the truth of namûs (Foucault, 1990).

The dissonant ways of making sense of namûs were immanent in many of my encoun-ters with women. This is most clearly seen with Rojda (who I discussed earlier). Belonging to the Alevi religious minority, Rojda experienced discrimination from within the Kurdish Sunni-Muslim circles in both Turkey and Kurdistan, as Alevi peoples were stigmatised as being 'rahat' (Turkish), which refers to a state of ease and relaxation, and thus lacking self-discipline. The insinuation is that Alevis lack namûs. This led to a visible tension, as most Alevis often reconceptualised namûs in their own personalised terms, and yet were quite frustrated with how they were considered by others. Rojda, uncomfortable with how Alevis are portrayed as being improper, said:

> [it is] as if we don't have 'edep, yol, eğitim' [Turkish: 'decency, path, education'], don't know how to sit and talk properly, or aren't able to control our 'eline, beline, diline' [Turkish: 'hands, hips, tongue']. As if we are humans living with animals.

Rojda opens up the question of the techniques of bodily comportment of namûs and of managing one's desire, namely one's hand gestures and tongue, and she further refers to an ethical relationship with namûs. Rojda notes that 'this "rahat" [comfort] concept is dif-ferent; we are "rahat", we can revise ourselves and develop according to circumstances, but we are not "rahat" as in their understanding'. Whilst operating with two conceptions of being comfortable and at ease, Rojda's account does two other things: first, she sug-gests that Alevi women are free, and more free than other segments of the population; second, she rejects that this freedom means an unlimited and uncontrollable disposition – as Alevis too are 'proper' and have the manners of namûs. She insists that they were

raised 'properly', 'so properly that they needed no warnings or punishments', as they knew of the appropriate ways of being namûs. It is here significant to take note of how for both Rojda and Berîvan their cultivation of a self of namûs requires them to distance themselves from the dominant 'talk' of namûs amongst the publicness of their social world, yet they articulate a personal relationship to a shared discursive formation of namûs which is simultaneously disavowed and inhabited.

Whereas for Berîvan and Rojda there is a degree of ambivalence in their ethical relation to namûs, for Dîlan – a young woman in her early twenties and living in the greater Copenhagen area – namûs is a moral and social value of the highest order. Early on in our conversations, Dîlan expresses to me that namûs is something that she wants to 'gift' to her children one day: 'namûs is very important […] it is part of our culture'. In this respect, namûs constitutes for her the truth of her existence and it also sets out the horizon of possibility as to what she can become as a person. As an ethical order, namûs influences all aspects of life, including how one ought to conduct oneself. Both Dîlan and Berîvan point to the relational ontology of namûs. Central to namûs as an ethical order is the accountability its subjects have to one another – as social life is deeply interdependent. Consequently, one must give a good account of oneself as namûs is a reflective order where one interrogates one's own actions as well as those of others in relation to, and against, the discursive commands of namûs.

According to Dîlan, this order of truth is lived and practised 'uniquely' amongst Kurds. The possession and performance of namûs is seen by her as a key marker that differentiates Kurdish people from both Turkish and Danish cultures and ways of being. In contrast to Danish and Turkish cultures, Kurds have a strong sense of propriety and close family ties which are expressed by Dîlan when she emphasises how namûs means that:

> I could never say 'I don't care about my mother'. If my mother calls and says I need your help, I'll go. That tie I don't think Danes have. I don't see that with them. As an example, I had a colleague who said he hadn't seen his cousin for two years. That's not normal with us, we see each other if we live in Denmark.

The fact that Kurds have strong family bonds played a significant role in many of the conversations I had with people about namûs, as many of them would express how their kinship ties are bounded, stable and solid. The normative standards of namûs thus exist within a bounded society where the norms of recognition and accountability both precede the formation of the subject.

For Dîlan, like many other subjects of namûs, her actions and behaviour would indicate that having namûs and being 'proper' is in fact one's 'natural' state, indicating a 'true' and 'authentic' character and self. Thus Dîlan located desires for transgressive or indulgent behaviour such as partying and drinking as being 'outside' or 'beyond' herself. This was expressed in our conversation through comments like 'I don't have that in me'. Berîvan too expressed this sentiment when stating that 'society's influence on me is not needed; I know where and when to do things'. Such comments point to a person who has inherent traits, as if these characteristics were essential and a given prior to processes of subjectivation and any coming-into-being as a person. These

feelings of a 'natural' self, or a deep essence of who and how one is, are never pre-discursive, however. Rather, any appearance of desires and emotions as 'natural' is an effect of self-cultivation which is either consciously or unconsciously undertaken, only to be later naturalised and forgotten. This is a trace of the concerted shaping of desire and what was an ethical moment of self-making.

Berîvan, Rojda and Dîlan all point to the *how* of becoming namûs and the virtues of namûs which call forth techniques of bodily comportment, modes of expression and ways of dress and appearing before others which cohere and serve to produce and shape desires that align with the virtues in question. Through engaging in such techniques, the subject works to align their inner self (virtues) and their outward actions, gestures, emotions and comportment. Berîvan expresses that namûs is a matter of one's thoughts and emotions. The relationship between technique and affect is clear when Berîvan describes her wearing of the veil. Berîvan's relationship to veiling is both complicated and insightful. She tells me how she:

> wear[s] the veil, but if you ask me if I believe in it, then absolutely not. In the beginning I believed and I decided to close up. But then I researched it, and I don't believe it now.

Still, Berîvan continues to dress modestly and wear the veil as it enables her to be more 'rahat' (comfortable), since it creates a distance to others and thus allows her to be more mobile in certain outdoor spaces. 'When I closed myself up [wore the veil] back then [in university], I could go anywhere "rahat" [comfortably]'. In that sense, veiling provided her with both a 'known' identity and social standing. Namûs, Berîvan expresses, is not about simply wearing the veil but also about 'keeping within the limit'. For her veiling alone cannot shape desires, as namûs is about knowing the right path, and maintaining a sense of rectitude that is deeply embodied and tied to the control of your emotions and desires.

When we talked about the techniques and bodily practices of namûs and the self, Dîlan mentioned how when she was about to get engaged to her husband, she spent much of the night before their engagement considering 'How does he sit with our elders? How is he as a person?'. For Dîlan, it was important that a person can sit with older people and have respect. Sitting with elders, and how one does so, reveals something about how one is as a person. For Dîlan, these practices were a direct indication of the 'soul' of her prospective life partner and his 'rightful' and proper living. This particular virtue was not gendered for Dîlan but a fundamental feature of being namûs. Integral to this understanding of embodying namûs is the self-regulation of one's ways of being, doing and saying in accordance with the virtues and substance of the ethos which one cultivates a sense of self in relation to – this is something our earlier discussion of Rojda highlighted too (' hands, hips, tongue').

These techniques constitute part of an aesthetics of the body that follows what the subjects of namûs regularly referred to as the 'way', the 'boundary' or the 'path'. Often in the course of my ethnography, it was stated that one must walk on 'the right path', and this implied aligning oneself with the higher truth of namûs. A person on the 'path' 'knows themself'; they possess a self-knowledge that is approximated through knowing which

virtues ought to become part of the self.[5] When one knows oneself, one's behaviour aligns with who one is – the outer and inner thus conjoin perfectly in this ethical relation. One is thus attentive to one's social space, including the 'proper' routines of behaviour and circumstances, as well as knowing one's family history so that one acts in accordance with its trajectory. The 'way' or 'path' as such resembles a form of askēsis, or what the later Foucault called an 'aesthetics of existence' (2011: 172). It presupposes that in being namûs one embodies the commands of social authority and becomes a living and bodily expression of it. Dîlan echoes Rojda on this point when she says 'I know myself, so I know how to stop myself'. She suggests that knowing oneself is to trust oneself, to place limits upon oneself and thus to reshape one's desires and to redirect them. The techniques charted above offer a clear sense of how namûs as a complex discursive formation is practised plurally, in an agentic and considered modality with the aim of reaching a harmony between discourse and the self.

Theorising namûs, self-making and agency

What emerges from the self-narrations of women living with and through namûs is the conflicted and often embracing relationship they have to the discourse and its virtues. This kind of relation is best understood through a post-colonial feminist reading of Foucault's work on ethics (Mahmood, 2012). It is helpful to think of namûs as residing in the nexus of three distinct dimensions: forms of knowledge (also referred to as discourse), relations of power (the subject's relation of self-to-others as an object of power) and modes of formation through practices of the self (the subject's relation of self-to-self) (Foucault, 2011: 172). These three elements are co-constitutive and cannot be reduced or absorbed by the others. The relation of self-to-self has been foregrounded in this analysis as it constitutes a central yet underexplored component of living with namûs. Berîvan, Dîlan and Rojda live within orders of namûs (discourse) and they engage in everyday practices which seek to cultivate the virtues of namûs. This process is captured by Dianna Taylor when she states that:

> on the one hand they are manifestations of the norms and values of the society in which an individual lives and thus establish a relationship between the individual and others; on the other, in so far as the individual takes them up and incorporates them into the construction of his or her own subjectivity, these practices establish a relationship of the individual to her or himself (2011: 174).

As such, the subject of namûs makes an object out of a part of themselves to monitor, improve and transform themselves in relation to the norm and virtues of namûs. That is to say that the subject, as a 'self-legislating ethical agent', establishes a relation to the discourse and recognises their own obligation to put it into practice (Colebrook, 1998: 47–48). This transformation is often motivated by the aims of attaining a certain state of 'happiness', 'purity', 'wisdom' or 'perfection' (Foucault, 1997: 225). As such, there is not necessarily a gap between one's own desires and socially prescribed desire, or

between subjectivity and subjection. Submission to authority is, on the contrary, the very condition which allows for the subject's potentiality and power (Mahmood, 2012).

Whilst namûs is a form of power-over the subject, it is also a relation of power and care between subjects, and an ethical relationship of self-to-self – as subjects actively work upon themselves in relation to the commands of namûs through creative, conscious and affective processes to cultivate this way of being. Namûs, therefore, cannot be understood through blanket explanations of 'crime', 'oppression' and 'patriarchy', as projected onto the bodies of women living in and through non-liberal conditions. What this alternative approach to understanding namûs reveals are the myriad ways in which subjects can come to relate to the particular way of life and how practices of the self are linked to the subject's capacity for self-determination when they constitute themselves within their own social and moral orders.

The question which most directly presents itself from a feminist theoretical perspective on the back of the above analysis is: to what extent, or in which form, is it possible to conceptualise agency for women within the ethical order of namûs? This question presents itself even more forcefully when we recall how the problem of agency, or feminist freedom, stands at the foundation of the extant critical literature on 'honour' or namûs as surveyed above. These are by no means secondary questions from the post-/decolonial feminist perspective advanced here. They are, however, questions that need to be approached with a degree of caution, both in terms of interrogating the relationship between agency and power and in rethinking the ontological and political assumptions that mark concepts like 'freedom' or 'agency' within feminist discourse.

Namûs, like all other social orders, provides both the resources and capacities for its subjects to exercise agency within 'the context of a set of norms that precede and exceed the subject' (Butler, 2005: 17). Understanding namûs as an ethical order reframes the subjects of namûs – not as dupes of ideology or as social structures but as ethical subjects who cultivate their own sense of self, along with certain potentialities and capacities for agency and self-knowledge in relation to and through subjection to the commands of the ethos. It allows us to engage with namûs as a 'generative, mobile, reversible set of relations and techniques through which a self is both governed and governs itself' (Roy, 2022: 8). In the work of Foucault and Mahmood one finds an account of how, through practices of self-making, there exists a non-voluntaristic mode of agency, or what Foucault playfully names freedom. Namûs shapes and calls forth such forms of agency, as it motivates certain modes of acting, speaking and being.

The account of agency and subjectivation which emerges here provides the ground upon which we can encounter the subject of namûs differently, acknowledging how namûs is both enabling and constraining for the subject. Agency is thus to be found not only in the resignification or subversions of norms (Butler, 1997) but also in the various modalities by which the subject inhabits the norms to which they are subjected. As a way of life, the attachment to namûs is embodied, affective and constitutive of one's (ethical) self. An existence without namûs was thus not imaginable for many women.

The subjects of namûs are agentival in that they each exercise agency through practices of self-cultivation and in expressing their sense of self. Agency need not exist within a frame of 'action bias' alone but can be found in practices of speech and

giving an account of oneself as an ethical subject (Madhok, 2013: 107). In this regard, many of the women I spoke with described how to be a woman with namûs is to be a woman who can express herself, explain her thoughts and defend her actions. Berîvan and Rojda's accounts of namûs and their own critical relation to its norms rendered this particularly explicit. Understanding agency in this way would, importantly, 'display a certain content neutrality in respect of our preferences' as to what would or would not be a free act or a sign of agency (Madhok, 2013: 106). Agency thus takes on a different form than commonly expressed through liberal discourse in which it has been understood in terms of the autonomy of the individual and the need to challenge or subvert social norms which inhibit the scope and space of action and choice. Juxtaposed with this view, a life with namûs is exactly what is considered as an expression of 'the good life' for its subjects.

The need to challenge the facticity of namûs as an integral aspect of their social and ethical lives is for many of the subjects of namûs replaced with the need to uphold, train and make even better their ethical relationship to the ethos. Most women would stay within the moral commands of namûs, but through their everyday practices they would re-shape their self in relation to each of the norms in a different way, rarely putting into question or denigrating the moral significance and importance of those norms. For its subjects, stretching the terms of namûs often required immense work on oneself. Self-transformation, it is important to note, always implies social transformation. In effect, by 'challenging the norms that constitute the self, one is also challenging the materials and conditions through which that self is constituted, or the wider social and political forces which exist in oneself' (Roy, 2022: 11). With the ethical subjects of namûs, such a self-transformation was slow, and it rarely meant that all the norms of namûs were paused. Even in such circumstances, however, namûs proved to be a resilient discourse, so that it could respond to the pressures it was exposed to by adapting to new contexts and spaces of social experience. Resilience is to be understood here as elasticity, insofar as the norms of namûs carry flexibility and malleability in relation to its circumstances such that they can be stretched and twisted. Some subjects sought to negotiate the terms of namûs and pushed at its limits, but even in doing so, many of these women still considered their ethical relationship to namûs intact. Their transformation was as much against the limits of the norms as it was a retraining of their affect, desire and sentiments in continued relation to those norms.

Broadening the terrain of namûs research

What emerges through the ethnographic encounter described in this article is how namûs is a complex matrix of discourse (systems of knowledge), relations of power (self-to-other relations) and the ethical process of cultivating the self (self-to-self relations). It is with this insight that we can start to approximate more precisely what namûs achieves in the making of the subject, and the multiplicity of ways that namûs is embodied and made affective by making up people. My point has been to argue that namûs constitutes a distinctive askēsis or 'way of life' in which its subjects engage in

a life-long process of becoming and perfecting namûs through considered and aesthetic-cum-ethical acts of embodying the virtues of namûs.

This theoretical approximation should not be taken to be complete or the final word on what namûs is or entails. Rather, what I offer us here is a route to theorise namûs as a complex phenomenon that intersects both truth and power as well as the idea of the subject, as such. At stake, therefore, is the breaking of new analytical ground in terms of how we come to understand, relate to and engage with those who live a life with and through namûs. It does so, however, without losing sight of the relations of power and domination that condition and structure such a life. What I have sought to propose is a counter-narrative both in terms of how namûs is taken to be 'honour' and 'HBV', and analytically in terms of attending to namûs' normative ambivalence. This article thus displaces the role of the feminist theorist and international human rights' authority as the 'proper' agents of normative critique of such a practice. It offers, instead, the feminist task of charting and holding open space for situated subjects of namûs to relate to, struggle with and maybe even transform the way in which they live with and through namûs on terms, and within a temporality, that is their own. That is to say, we must engage with women to enhance their lives – a task which requires empirical analysis, intercultural dialogue and attention to what these women articulate as their desires (Khader, 2019).

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Notes

1. Namûs is also an Armenian, Persian and Turkish concept. In light of my ethnography and the cultural and historical differences of this concept, I only engage with namûs through the lens of the Kurdish interlocutors I worked with. It should be noted that a number of interviews were conducted with Kurdish women in the Turkish and Danish languages, further demonstrating some of the cultural connections across languages and borders, and troubling any purity one might wish to ascribe to namûs.
2. The interview with Rojda was conducted in 2019. To maintain anonymity and protect the privacy of interlocutors, pseudonyms have been used throughout.
3. This is a point for which I am indebted to Sumi Madhok and our conversations about decolonial feminism. Sumi makes a similar observation in a forthcoming article, which I have benefited from the opportunity to read an early draft of.
4. Interviews with Berîvan, Dîlan and Rojda were conducted in 2019.

5. I agree here with Butler (2005: 28) when she argues that: 'one finds that the only way to know oneself is through a mediation that takes place outside of oneself, exterior to oneself, by virtue of a convention or a norm that one did not make in which one cannot discern oneself as an author or an agent of one's own making'.

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