Introduction: pluralising Muslim youth identities: intersections of nation, religion and gender

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Paper 1

Introduction: Pluralising Muslim Youth Identities: Intersections of Nation, Religion and Gender

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Abstract

The introductory paper to this special edition provides an overview of the multi-country research project on Muslim youth identities upon which all the papers draw. It includes outlines of its methodological and theoretical frameworks and its rationale. Using a case study approach, the research explored the identity narratives of Muslim youth in the four socio-political contexts of Pakistan, Senegal, Nigeria and Lebanon, each of which have distinctive post-colonial histories. In each context we explored how youth performed and constructed their identities with reference to intersecting discourses of nation, religion and gender. The data was collected with the support of local researchers through female and male focus group discussions which sought to privilege youth voices. Our analysis drew upon feminist, poststructural and postcolonial theorists (e.g. Butler, Foucault, Hall, Said), who understand identities to be constituted through difference. Taking up this theoretical stance, we highlight the axes of difference that were integral to youth identity formations, discussing these with reference to internal and external 'others'.

By attending to youth voices and their shifting discourses of allegiance and difference, the research provides a counter to the stigmatisation and misrepresentation of Muslim youth within much Western media. Our analyses emphasise the ways that youth identities are constructed within their particular socio-historical, postcolonial contexts and the contingencies of their local social relations, while also acknowledging the interpenetration of the global and the local. The introductory paper concludes with an overview of six articles which provide cross-case analyses that address key themes emerging from our data.

Key words: youth identities; religion; gender; nation; postcoloniality

Word count: 6343

Introduction

This special edition of *Social Identities* draws on a multi-country research project which set out to explore the identity narratives of Muslim youth in the four socio-political contexts of Pakistan, Senegal, Nigeria and Lebanon. More specifically, this research investigated the intersections of nation, religion and gender within these identity discourses (Dunne, Durrani, Fincham and Crossouard, 2017). Our interest in Muslim youth identity constructions in these contexts was prompted by a concern about the frequent demonization of Muslim youth in much popular media in the West, as well as within right-wing political discourses. The phenomenon known as the ‘youth bulge’ in the Global South has also provoked international concern about youth disenfranchisement, alienation and radicalisation, which has again been too readily associated with Muslim populations. We were acutely aware of the lack of counter narratives that drew on in-depth research that explored the perspectives of Muslim youth themselves.

As outlined further below, the research used a case study approach that privileged youth voices and aimed to counter overly homogenised constructions of young Muslims. Our research sought instead to attend to the particular socio-political contexts and the local social relations that framed youth’s identity narratives. Spanning three geographical regions, each of our research contexts has distinctive post-colonial histories that have produced different nation state formations within which religion is differently implicated. In addition, all of them are Muslim-majority countries, although while Lebanon and Nigeria are multi-religious, with a small Muslim majority, Pakistan and Senegal are predominantly Muslim. All four countries have large youth populations. These different characteristics mean that our research can offer critical case studies through which to interrogate youth identity formations and the dominant discourses in each context with respect to nation, religion and gender.

We expand upon the research methodology below. Its main data set consisted of focus group discussions with youth in each context that were segregated by gender and by religion. These data were gathered by the end of 2014. We drew on postcolonial, poststructural and feminist theorists in our analysis, attending in particular to the ways identities are constructed through difference. While ‘Troubling Muslim Youth Identities: nation, religion, gender’ by Dunne et al. (2017) presents case studies that take up each of our research contexts, the suite of articles presented in this special edition provides cross-case analyses that illuminates wider themes. This enables an analytical perspective that draws across the different country cases to give insights into the work of local and national contexts in producing both particularities and commonalities in youth narratives of identity

and belonging. The articles in this volume are configured to engage with and illustrate these wider themes. After describing our theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches in more detail, we then provide an overview of each of the six articles that make up this special edition.

Youth identities and their intersecting discourses of nation, religion and gender: a theoretical mapping

As outlined above, our research into Muslim youth identities drew upon poststructural, postcolonial and feminist theorists who understand identities as an ongoing discursive production, a continual process of becoming that is relational and fluid, rather than being stable and immutable (Hall, 1996; Weedon, 2004). This resists common-sense understandings of identity as reflecting a sovereign, individual consciousness. We are instead interpellated into particular subject positions, rather than being 'knowing subjects' who act in sovereign ways in and on the world. In resisting modern understandings of identity that have privileged the rational actor, we also stress how identity performances are embodied and affective, bound up with the material contexts of our everyday lives.

An analysis of discourses of identity also takes account of institutions that have become an integral part of everyday lives in contemporary societies. Institutions such as schooling, the law, the family, religion frame our interpellation into particular (citizen) subject positions through everyday practices that have become utterly banal. This very banality affords normalcy and legitimacy to some ways of being, while disqualifying others. Some of these institutions and their practices are products of the modern age, while others (such as religion) pre-date modernity, although they are clearly still significant in societies around the globe.

The very division of what is understood as 'modern' and 'pre-modern' brings out the importance of difference in the constitution of our social worlds. Implicit in this differentiation is a hierarchical evaluation where the modern is articulated in a positive way, while the pre-modern is constructed as backward, a part of the past, as something to be left behind. For poststructural and postcolonial theorists, such agonistic demarcations of difference and the power relations that sustain them are intrinsic to our meaning-making and to our construction as subjects (Hall, 1996). As discussed in Dunne et al. (2017), our identity performances are constituted through these relations of difference. We are constantly positioning ourselves against who we are *not*, or against what Mouffe (1992) describes as the 'constitutive other'.

Who counts as 'other' in a particular context cannot be assumed however. Identity narratives are always a product of local social relations and our trajectories within these. Importantly, because they are contingent upon such relations, discourses of identity in any context are inevitably informed by traces of the past. Focusing particularly on the production of a 'national' identity and culture, Bhabha (2004, p. 221) notes how a 'double temporality' is always implicated. In other words, the past is not left behind, but is constantly - if selectively - re-invoked in the production of a national culture and identity. We particularly stress this in this introductory article, as invocations of the past were especially significant within youth narratives of identity. Specifically, across these different postcolonial contexts, a recurrent theme within youth's discourses of national identity was the struggle of their respective nations to emerge from colonial rule as independent nation-states.

As the above suggests, poststructural and postcolonial theoretical understandings also inform the ways in which we understand the key axes of analyses in our research - nation, religion and gender, each of which we now expand upon briefly (for further discussion, see Dunne et al., 2017). Our analysis of youth's narratives of national identity understand nation to be a social construct of relatively recent origins, even if a sense of nation now has a common-sense facticity. The nation has been conceptualised as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991; 2006) but what is particularly important for our research is to consider the additional complexities of imagining a nation in contexts of postcoloniality (Bhabha, 2004; Chatterjee, 1993; 2003; Fanon, 1967; Go, 2013; Said, 1978). Pertinent critiques from these sources that are relevant here include the ways colonial powers and local elites were implicated in the formation of national boundaries. Related to this, is the way that newly independent states were fractured at the outset by internal divisions that had been sedimented by colonial rule. An associated critique concerns the intense gendering of the modern narrative of progress which saturates the imagined community of the nation. This refers to the ways that gender differences were integral to national formation in postcolonial contexts (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Lugones, 2007) which we elaborate later in this section.

A further issue within modern understandings of the nation are its assumptions of a secular division between religion and the state. This 'secularization thesis' has been roundly disputed (Asad, 2003; Butler, 2011; Calhoun, 2011; Kalberg, 1997). As we discuss in the articles that follow, this separation was also multiply challenged by the ways in which youth's narratives of religion and nation intersected. Chatterjee (1993) makes the additional point that the struggle of postcolonial nations to define themselves against the colonial 'other' led them to defend their uniqueness in cultural and spiritual (religious) domains, particularly as their development of modern institutions of government

and statecraft emulated practices of Western origin. As we show in our analyses, (see in particular Paper 7 of this issue), gender symbolism was as a consequence unremittingly implicated in youth imaginaries of nation in all of our research contexts.

This understanding of gender is again inflected by our theoretical frameworks which resist the modern binary of male and female, and the conflation of gender, sex and sexuality. Our interest in gender takes up the notion of the performative (Butler, 1993; 2006). This means that rather than gender being something that we ‘have’, gender is something that we do or perform, in ways that are framed by the discursive conventions that have become normalised within particular social and cultural contexts. This means that gender cannot be assumed to be a universal construct; its normative framing is contingent and shifting. At the same time, Western understandings of gender have inscribed a legacy of patriarchy and presumptive heterosexuality that remains hegemonic in many contexts. Significantly for the contexts of our research, postcolonial writers have highlighted how processes of colonial rule resulted in the reconstruction of local gender norms and imposed gender categories and systems of patriarchy in contexts where gender had not hitherto been significant in local power hierarchies (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Focusing on a range of different postcolonial contexts, Lugones (2007) also highlights how the imposition of patriarchy in colonial times was racialized, in ways that additionally served the interests of capitalism.

In relation to nation, as already highlighted above, Chatterjee’s (1993) analysis points to the ways the construction of a national identity in postcolonial contexts of Africa and Asia redoubled the pressures on women, given that maintenance of the cultural and the spiritual traditionally fell within the domestic rather than the public sphere. This liberal binary was relayed through the imposition of colonial rule, in ways that could disrupt or intensify existing gender norms. Across many studies, the production of national narratives has been shown to be deeply gendered (e.g. Mayer, 2000; McClintock, 1995; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989) and indeed continues to be defined by the traces of colonialism (Fanon, 1967; Coly, 2015). We take up the gender symbolism in youth’s narratives of nation (and religion) in Paper 7 of this issue.

Turning now to religion, we have noted earlier how much Western media relays overly homogenised stereotypes of Muslim youth, associating them too readily with religious fundamentalism and violence. As we also pointed out earlier, a further rationale for our research is the absence of in-depth research into how Muslim youth themselves understand and perform their religious identities, and what their religion means to them. The privileging of secularity within western democracies too

often casts religion in a negative light, and assumes that as nations become more developed, the rationalities of science and technology will prevail, and religion will fade in its relevance. As discussed in Asad et al. (2009), this assumes a binary of belief and will, which casts religion as a 'choice' that the self-knowing and self-owning subject can decide to follow or to refute. Countering such modern understandings of the subject, Butler (2011, p. 72) argues instead that religion works as a 'matrix of subject formation, an embedded framework for evaluations, and a mode of belonging and embodied social practice'. Such embodied social practices and modes of belonging deeply inform who we are and how we live, in ways that are not necessarily open to conscious revision or rational decision-making. A mode of being is not something from which one can readily disinvest. Even in cases when there is an ostensible disavowal of religion, one's embodied social practices may also continue to be informed by a religious ethos. For example, the ethos of Protestantism - in particular its valorisation of the pursuit of individual success - has been seen as intrinsic to the development of capitalism in the West, despite its protestations of secularism (Kalberg, 1997; Butler, 2011). Indeed, as Butler (2011) argues, the very concept of the public sphere can be considered a 'protestant accomplishment', which allows particular religious traditions to continue in a doxic way within a putatively secular administration. In such cases, Butler notes that 'public life presupposes and reaffirms one dominant religious tradition as the secular' (2011, p. 71), while other religions are cast as 'other', as a threat to public life and to democracy.

In the articles that follow, we revisit many of these discussions, deepening them in relation to the themes that each of them addresses, as outlined further below.

Methodology and research methods

The research drawn upon in this article focused on youth narratives of identity with respect to nation, religion and gender in four different postcolonial contexts, these being Nigeria, Senegal, Pakistan and Lebanon (Dunne et al., 2017). These four countries offer critical case studies of the grammars of youth identity, particularly as they have different colonial pasts (under British, French and Ottoman rule), and also reflect different postcolonial settlements, particularly with respect to the incorporation of religion within their post-independence national constitutions. They span three different geographical areas of the world: Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. They are also Muslim-majority countries, although their populations reflect different religious compositions. Two countries (Pakistan and Senegal) are predominantly Muslim, and two (Lebanon and Nigeria), have significant minorities who are Christian. This geographic spread also means that research reflects the voices of Sunni, Shia and Sufi youth. Socio-demographically, all countries have high youth

populations and rank poorly both in the Fragile States Index and in gender equality measures. In Table 1 below we provide statistical comparisons using data available in 2019. These data are presented to illustrate the differences between our case study countries in terms of indicators used by northern –based international agencies. At the same time we recognise both the political sensitivities and limitations of quantitative categories and rankings. The limitations include difficulties in data quality assurance given the variable, uncertain and uneven processes of data collection, aggregation and presentation.

Insert Table 1: Case Study Country Statistical Comparisons HERE

In addition to these multiple similarities and differences, a key rationale for the development of our research in these contexts was that the authors of this special edition had already conducted qualitative research there, so had strong background knowledge to support their understandings of their context, as well as good research relationships with local partners. Máiréad Dunne led the case study in Nigeria, Kathleen Fincham in Lebanon, and Barbara Crossouard in Senegal. Naureen Durrani led the Pakistan case study. All authors were based in a UK university at the time of the research.

Alongside observations of the context, both within the interview settings and more broadly, the main data set derives from focus group discussions (FGDs) with Muslim and Christian youth in each context. The concept of youth has been defined in different ways, using different age brackets. However, the use of chronological age fails to take account of contextual differences in age relations.

Our approach to this was to include participants who self-identified as youth. Table 2 below provides an overview of the FGDS that were conducted and their composition by gender, religion, main sect and age in each of the four countries. In all, a total of 58 FGDS were conducted in which 256 youth participated, this being an equal number of females and males. Most of participants were youth in higher education which means that our sample is relatively educated. Given the numbers accessing higher education in the contexts of our research (see for example the average years of schooling in Table 1 above), they can be considered relatively elite. Further commentary on sampling processes within particular countries is provided in the articles that follow.

Insert Table 2 Sample across country cases HERE

The main aim of the FGDS was to create a space for youth to freely narrate their identities and generate discussions of the differences through which these were constituted. Early trials in Nigeria with mixed sex groups proved unsuccessful in generating good discussions. Mixed focus groups would also have been impossible to arrange in Pakistan. Thereafter, with only two exceptions in Lebanon, the interviews were segregated by sex and by religion, with the aim of creating a better space for addressing potentially sensitive issues. While successful in generating some rich discussions, the power relations within a FGD clearly remain important however. We reflect on this further in Paper 6 of this issue.

The research instruments were developed collaboratively by the UK research team. They included a focus group discussion interview schedule, and a bio data sheet through which details such as gender, nationality, religion, age, main languages, ethnicity and education level were recorded. These details were later analysed using Excel, to develop a profile of the participants in each context. The instruments were initially trialled with Nigerian youth, and then further developed in discussion with all four authors. Questions included how participants imagined their ideals of nation and religion in their respective contexts, both for males and females. It actively invoked issues of

difference by probing what nationalities and ethnicities participants would not want to have, or how their lives would be different if they were Christian (or Muslim). All questions were probed for gender differences. The research instruments are available as appendices in Dunne et al. (2017).

The research was subject to full ethical review. Information sheets and consent forms were developed, translated into relevant local languages and used across all four contexts. The FGD schedule was also translated into relevant local languages. A piloting phase took place in Nigeria between 2011 and 2012 and the main fieldwork phase was completed in early 2014. In the other three country cases the focus group discussions and observations were arranged and conducted mostly during a 2-week fieldwork visit during the later months of 2014. These were made possible by the researcher familiarity with each national context. The interview was estimated to take one hour, and in practice varied between 40 minutes and 90 minutes. With the participants' permissions, all FGDs were recorded, translated into English and fully transcribed.

The researcher collectives in each context were configured differently depending on the prior research links of the UK –based researchers. The support of the local researchers was vital to the research. It was through them that youth were approached to volunteer their participation, the interviews were conducted and data produced and organised. In the majority of cases the local researchers were matched to the gender and religion of the participants. In some contexts the local researchers were youth themselves. The local researchers were inducted into the research processes through a crib sheet which shared the intentions, key concepts and approach to the interviews. Their appreciation of the interviews as an open space for the articulation of youth views and perspectives was critical to the ways they engaged with participants, their attentiveness to power differentials and the quality of the conversations within the FGDs. In a general sense, the ways the participants could relate to local researchers also allowed the interviews to unfold more comfortably. Through the research induction and interviews the local researchers suggested and used slight changes in wording and order of the schedule as appropriate to their participants and the context. In addition, they were fluent in local languages and sensitive to local social and cultural norms. This allowed them to provide valuable expansions on youth's narratives during the analysis phases, taking up and elaborating upon different cultural references that might otherwise have remained obscure. Additionally, in Northern Nigeria a state of emergency declared in 2013 in response to the Boko Haram insurgency meant that the UK based researcher was prevented from travelling to region, the study would not have been possible without the local researchers.

Further discussions of the conduct of the research is provided in the articles that follow, particularly in Durrani and Crossouard (Paper 3 in this issue) and Fincham and Dunne (Paper 4 in this issue). This includes a more detailed depiction of the locations of the research in each country, as well as a fuller account of the sampling processes and the samples within each context. We now turn to a brief summary of the overall arguments of the six articles that together make up this special edition.

Summary of the key arguments of the articles in this special edition

The article 'Muslim Youth as Global Citizens' that follows this introduction to this special edition provides a cross case analysis of youth's narratives of identity that sets out to trouble the dominant construction of Muslim youth in the West, and indeed the extent that the concept of the nation has relevance in a late modern world (see Beck, 2002, for example). In this article, Crossouard and Dunne (Paper 2 in this issue) explore how Muslim youth might be understood as 'global citizens'. They first highlight how Muslim youth valued their nation, and how their national and religious identities intersected. It takes up the ways youth across all contexts represented Islam as a religion of peace and harmony and stressed how this aligned well with their democratic values. This provides a strong counter therefore to the demonization of Islam in some Western media, and its construction as anti-democratic. They suggest instead that Muslim youth's strong affective commitments to the religious community of the 'global Ummah' can be understood as a distinctive form of global, cosmopolitan citizenship, in ways that are sharply differentiated from modern (secular) understandings of cosmopolitanism. This then leads into a critique of international policy agendas which continue to reproduce modern binaries. It is the first of several articles in this special edition that challenge the modern secularisation thesis and its construction of Islam in particular as the antithesis of democracy.

The two articles that follow take up the construction of national identities, firstly in the context of Pakistan and Senegal (National Identities and the External Other in Muslim Majority Contexts, Durrani and Crossouard, Paper 3 in this issue), and secondly in Lebanon and Nigeria (Fracturing the Nation: Muslim Youth Identities in Multi Religious States, Fincham and Dunne, Paper 4 in this issue). The analysis in both articles is situated within an overview of the socio-political background to each different context. This includes their emergence as independent post-colonial nations, and the different ways that religion was implicated in the construction of the nation. The analysis of the data takes up the concept of the 'other' and shows how national identities in Pakistan and Senegal were predominantly produced in relation to others that were external to the nation. In both these contexts, the external others who were repeatedly invoked in youth's narratives of nation were their

previous colonial rulers. A further external other was the other of 'the West', or of 'white people'. In contrast, Fincham and Dunne's analysis of youth's narratives of nation in Lebanon and Nigeria show how these were dominated by differentiation against 'internal others', which involved intersections of region, ethnicity and religion. Importantly, their analysis traces how the fractures which continue to divide these nations are the product of divisions that were hardened during colonial eras and papered over in the production of the postcolonial nation. Indeed in all contexts, the colonial past was constantly re-animated within youth's narratives of identity.

The paper that follows (*Pluralising Islam: doing Muslim identities differently*, by Dunne, Durrani, Fincham and Crossouard, Paper 5 of this issue) challenges the over-homogenisation of Muslim identities as they have been commonly represented in the West. It presents an analysis of the different ways that our Muslim participants performed their religious identities. This analysis understands identity productions to involve on-going processes that emerge within specific and particular national histories to produce plurality and diversity within and across contexts. The analysis begins by stressing the common principles that informed youth's representations of Islam, highlighting for example youth's proclamation of the values of universal peace and harmony as being intrinsic to Islam. The ways youth's national and religious belongings were sutured together then led us to explore the distinctive socio-historical conjunctures of each nation's formation, and how this produced different internal/external others through which youth articulated their identities. In contrast to the commonalities described in the preceding section, we now illuminate how the intersections of the local and the national produce pluralities. Finally, this paper takes up the intersections of these diverse identity narratives with global discursive flows around Islam and the responses this provoked for Muslim youth participants in their different national contexts. Overall, we illuminate the multiplicities and hybridities of youth's religious identities within and across the cases. Throughout this paper, we challenge stereotypical tropes evident in contemporary discourses which too often conflate Islamic faith with religious fundamentalism.

The final articles of the special issue both address gender and the production of youth identities. The first (*Understanding agency differently: female youth's Muslim identities* by Crossouard, Dunne and Durrani. Paper 6 in this issue) confronts contemporary debates about the agency of female Muslims, and their stereotypical construction as subordinated, and lacking agency. This was a discourse that we set out to refute through our research. However, we then found ourselves troubled by the depictions of the performances of women's national and religious identities by both male and female youth for the ways these often represented women as subordinate to men. In this paper we

reflect on the methodological limitations of our research approach, in particular how the power relations of the FGDs, social norms and pressures towards conformity might have constrained more dissenting voices. We engage in a discussion of female agency drawing upon Mahmood (2012), before turning to the different ways that female youth did resist their construction as subordinate and inferior within ideals of nation and religion.

The final paper (Gender symbolism and the expression of national and religious identities, by Dunne, Fincham, Crossouard and Durrani, Paper 7 of this issue) traces the symbolic importance of gender in the assertions of youth's national and religious identities. It illustrates the gender assumptions within youth identity narratives and how these produce masculinist and patriarchal national imaginaries that instantiate a heteronormative hierarchy and gender polarity. In the intersections of nation and religion, we show how particular claims to Islam legitimise and depend on the surveillance and regulation of women. We take up how gender is significant in the production of the others of the nation and how through these articulations, it remains a site of postcolonial resistance in ways that strengthen and stabilise heteronormative gender hierarchies. We also show however how youth's imaginaries are of a modernising religious nation, which sits in contra-distinction to Western secular imaginaries of nation. We challenge such presumptions of secularity, showing how religion is central in the production of nation states, and how gender is inscribed in both national and religious imaginaries. We illuminate the gender continuities of post-colonial and former colonising states, and how both sustain the continued surveillance and regulation of women and their bodies. We conclude by questioning the adequacy of liberal understandings of gender equality for disrupting the powerful gender symbolism embedded in youth's national and religious imaginaries and the material inequalities these instantiate.

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