Being a young Muslim woman in Southern Ghana: intersections of nation, religion and gender

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Abstract
This paper draws upon recent research that explored Muslim youth identity constructions in southern Ghana. At a time when Muslim youth are often demonized and Islam is represented as incompatible with western democratic ideals, the research explored the intersections of nation, religion, ethnicity and gender in identity narratives of female students in high school and higher education in southern Ghana. After describing the Ghanaian socio-historical context, we outline the post-structural and post-colonial theories used to understand key concepts such as identity and youth. We then describe our methodological approach before presenting our intersectional analysis of data from the focus group discussions. This highlights female youths’ deep commitments to nation and religion, the marginalisation of young Muslim females in this Christian-majority context, and finally, the identity tensions articulated by participants between different Islamic traditions. We further show how all of these identity constructions were intersected by gender.

Key words
Muslim youth identities; Islam; nation; gender; education; Ghana

Introduction
The precarious situation of youth across the Global South combined with the phenomenon of the ‘youth bulge’ has fuelled fears of youth disenfranchisement and alienation in many national contexts. The productive incorporation of youth into the modern state is also a key concern within international policy circles (UN, 2016; World Bank, 2007). However, when it comes to Muslim youth, such fears too readily slide into discussions of youth radicalisation and religious extremism. As sociologists of education and development with a history of research into youth identities in the Global South, we were critical of the tendency for Muslim youth to be represented in overly homogenised and negative ways, with males rather than females often a primary concern. Like Masquelier and Soares (2017), we were also aware that while there was a growing volume of studies addressing the problematics of ‘youth’ in the Global North and South (e.g. Honwana and de Boek, 2005; Nilan and Feixa, 2006), Muslim youth were largely understudied, including in Ghana itself.

Youthful populations have been looked to as a demographic dividend, as a driver of economic change and democratic reform, but conversely can be viewed as a threat to democracy - a source of instability and undesirable radicalism. As Herrera and Bayat (2010, p.3) note, youth have been interpellated as ‘builders of the future,’ but are equally ‘stigmatised and feared as “disruptive” agents prone to radicalism and deviance’. This latter discourse has particularly targeted Muslim youth, leaving Muslim-majority contexts with high youth populations highlighted as potential flashpoints for political conflict (Urdal, 2011). Such ways of depicting Islam tend to homogenisation. They have constructed Islam as ‘anti-modern’ or ‘pre-modern’, a violent, non-progressive ideology that is incompatible with the ideals of western, ‘secular’ democracies (Asad, 2003). Such representations also misrecognise the many ways of being Muslim, which are produced in the intersections of gender, nation, ethnicity, age and religion (Dunne et al, 2020).

The category of youth itself in these policy discourses is also inadequately conceptualised. It is often defined through chronological age, ignoring how age relations differ from context to context. The concept is typically framed a modern, western imaginary that assumes a linear passage from childhood to adulthood. While childhood is idealised as a period of innocence and dependency,
adulthood is associated with autonomy, maturity and responsibility, with youthfulness as a liminal phase imbued both with risk and possibility. This teleological narrative of individual development was intrinsic to the emergence of the modern, capitalist state (France, 2007). Its ideals of education, work, family and citizenship are now anchored in the discourses of multilateral organisations such as the World Bank (2007), as well as global technologies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). However, although projecting a powerful imaginary, the normative propositions of this teleology of development are often very distant from the social relations and livelihood possibilities of young people in the Global South (Burman, 2010; Ruddick, 2003; Farrugia, 2018).

Our critical engagement with these policy discourses prompted our intersectional approach to researching Muslim youth narratives of identity in postcolonial contexts (Dunne et al, 2017). We sought to resist stereotypical, overly-homogenised constructions by seeking out the perspectives of those who identified as youth within this Ghanaian context. By understanding identity as a process of becoming that is contextually contingent and fractured, we were open to the pluralities of youth identity formations, including their plural ways of being Muslim (Deeb and Harb, 2013; Dunne et al, 2020).

In this vein, this article focuses on the identity narratives of female Muslim youth in southern Ghana who were in higher education or the final years of secondary school. We first describe the Ghanaian socio-historical context to indicate the wider discourses that frame youths’ identity formations. After addressing our theoretical frameworks and research methodology, we provide a thematic analysis of the identity narratives of our participants. Our analysis highlights young Muslim women’s deep commitments to nation and religion, alongside their marginalisation in this Christian-majority context. In addition, we signal the complex tensions between different Islamic traditions that were articulated by the participants, highlighting how this refutes the homogenised ways that Islam is often represented. Finally, we argue again for the value of an intersectional approach to youth identity constructions, both for disrupting this homogenisation, and for illuminating the sustained ways that nation and religion are inflected by gender.

The Ghanaian context
The Republic of Ghana, located in West Africa, has a very young population – around 60% of its 24 million inhabitants were reported to be under the age of 25 (GSS, 2013). Economically, Ghana is classified as a lower-middle income country, although it has high levels of inequality. It is ranked only 140 out of 189 countries in both the UNDP Human Development Index and in its Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2018). After more than a century of British colonial rule, it became a democratic republic in 1960 under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah. Despite a subsequent series of coups and periods of military rule, Ghana has functioned as a multi-party democracy since 1992. Nevertheless, gender and regional inequalities remain important. Women hold just under 13% of the seats in Ghana’s parliament (UNDP, 2018). Other gender disparities include national literacy rates at 65% for females versus 78% for males, and only 7 females for every 10 males in higher education (World Economic Forum, 2018). Importantly, regions with higher Muslim populations are particularly disadvantaged. For example, the upper secondary completion rate in Northern Region is 9%, versus 31% in Greater Accra (UNESCO, 2020).

The great majority of Ghanaians are Christian (71%), followed by Muslims (17%) and those who observe traditional religions (5%) (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). Islam preceded Christianity in the region, spreading through Muslim scholars who for centuries had travelled along flourishing trans-Saharan trade routes, producing what Hanson (2017) calls a ‘savanna’ tradition of Islam that ran from the Senegal river basin to Lake Chad. Christianity was brought in by European traders in the 15th Century. On their arrival, they found well-developed economic systems, with established networks of scholars and schools in most towns (Skinner, 2013). Considerable missionary activity
accompanied the establishment of the Gold Coast Colony and this led many Africans to affiliate with Christianity. However, as discussed below, shifting religious affiliations also saw the emergence of distinctive Islamic groups in the predominantly Christian coastal regions (Hanson, 2017).

The different histories of the arrival of Islam and Christianity in the region explains the contemporary distribution of Christians and Muslims, with the Muslim population located chiefly in the north of Ghana; where they are the majority group¹ (GSS, 2013). However, Muslims are also a minority presence in all regions of the south (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 (Muslims as % of Population of Ghana’s Regions) here

As in the rest of West Africa, the majority of Ghana’s Muslims are Sunni, often with long-standing connections to Sufism, a mystical form of Islam that was viewed sympathetically in colonial times as syncretic and tolerant, although with associations also to anti-colonial independence movements (Otayek and Soares, 2007: 4). Ghana also hosts a small number of Shia Muslims and a significant Ahmadiyya community.

Importantly to our concerns, the Ahmadiyya have their own distinctive West African history. In his analysis of this history, Hanson (2017) identifies the influence of resettled African slaves from the Americas; Muslims from the ‘Hausa Constabulary’, a paramilitary group that were recruited by Britain maintain order in the Gold Coast Colony; and Fante Methodists who had converted to Islam. These complex influences all contributed to the constitution of an Ahmadiyya Mission in Ghana in 1921. After setting up in Saltpond, on the Gold Coast, they later spread northwards into the interior, forming missions in Kumasi and then in Wa. Integral to the Ahmadiyya Mission was the development of ‘Arabic/English’ schooling. This gave Muslim children access to British-style education without them having to attend a Christian missionary school (Skinner, 2013). Ahmadiyya schooling now provides education to 60,000 students in Ghana. It is fully recognised by the Ghanaian Education authorities and is reputed for being high-achieving (Skinner, 2013). Historically, the Ahmadis were however resisted in northern Ghana, where the older ‘savanna’ Islamic traditions prevailed. Ahmadi Islam also occupies an ambiguous position within the wider Islamic community. Differences in religious principles led to them being declared ‘non-Muslims’ in Pakistan in 1974 and debarred from religious pilgrimage to Mecca (Hanson, 2017).

Despite these long-standing differences, Ghana has seemed unaffected by Islamist militancy until recently. However, the revelation that some Ghanaian higher education students had left the country to join ‘Islamic State’ put Ghanaian Muslim youth in the spotlight. Concerns about youth radicalisation and the youth ‘bulge’ have also been expressed within Ghana (Aning and Abdullah, 2013). The marginalised position of many Ghanaian Muslims has heightened these concerns. Poverty is high in the Zongos (urban enclaves with largely Muslim populations) and the Muslim-majority, northern regions of Ghana are the poorest in the country (GSS, 2013).

The different routes through which Islam arrived in Ghana has complex implications for the intersections of religion with ethnicity. The Mole-Dagbon, the Gonja and the Wala are all from the north and are predominantly Muslim; they are minority ethnic groups in the south. In Central Region and Greater Accra, where this research was conducted, the Akan (including the Fante) and the Ga are demographically the most significant ethnic groups. As discussed above however, the history of the Ahmadi community in the south of Ghana would indicate that they are ethnically diverse. Nevertheless, Muslims are clearly in the minority in the regions where the research was conducted (8.7% in Central Region, 11.9% in Greater Accra) (GSS, 2013).
Overall, what we have highlighted here is the complex history of the Muslim community in Ghana, where we have drawn attention to its minority status in this Christian majority country, particularly in the south. This all has bearing on the identity narratives of our research participants.

**Theoretical framing**
Before turning to our analysis, we elaborate how we understand our key concepts, including identity. This takes up post-structural and postcolonial theories which see all meaning-making and our identities to be constructed through difference, in ways that are agonistic and always bound up with power relations (Mouffe, 1992). Rather than being fixed and stable, the production of identity is a contingent and fluid process of becoming that is never complete. In privileging these discursive understandings of identity, we privilege relations to the ‘Other’ - who we are not - as integral to meaning-making and the performance of our identities. As Hall puts it:

> it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term - and thus its identity - can be constructed. (Hall, 2000: 4-5)

This notion of the ‘other’ is intrinsic to the boundaries which frame all identity constructions. Although our identities do not reflect a stable, sovereign consciousness, they are nevertheless constantly constrained by regulatory norms and evaluative frameworks that construct some ways of being as legitimate, and others as illegitimate - as ‘othered’. An illustration of this is the ways youth identities themselves can be constructed against the constitutive others of the child and the adult. Importantly, the meaning of any of these terms is always indexical and contingent, so that an interpellation as a ‘youth’ summons into the frame what Durham (2000: 116) calls a ‘social landscape of power, rights, expectations, and relationships’. Being named a youth not only produces differentiation from a child or adult, it brings contextually-defined rather than universal expectations about a youth’s positioning in society.

Our poststructural theorisation also questions modern understandings of gender as an identity structure. Rather than reflecting a biological essence or a stable identity characteristic, we consider gender in discursive terms, so that it is brought into being through the ongoing re-citation and re-signification of gender norms. This destabilises the normative binary construction of gender in terms of male and female sexes, and calls attention instead to the ways gender is ‘done’, whether by males or females, within particular contexts. This ‘doing’ of gender draws attention again to the discursive practices through which our identities are constructed. These have constitutive force - in other words, they constitute the very realities they appear to describe:

> [t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results. (Butler, 1990:34)

As outlined above, from a discursive perspective this ‘doing’ is framed by normative frameworks that are shot through with hierarchies of evaluation and difference - our identities are constructed through differentiating ourselves against who we are not. These differences have deep socio-historical roots and are marked through social constructs such as gender, ethnicity, generation and nationality. Each of these brings into play important normative frameworks and ideals, which become all the more powerful for the ways they intersect.

The arguments in Butler et al (2011) are also important in responding to the contemporary demonization of Islam in many Western contexts. In particular, Butler challenges the strong
separation of religious and national belongings that some understandings of secularism suppose. Pointing to the (continuing) power of religion in contemporary life, Butler et al. (2011) argue that particular forms of religion are often already embedded within the public sphere of contexts which claim to be ‘ secular’. This affords these religions relative invisibility so that public life ‘presupposes and reaffirms one dominant religious tradition as the secular’ (p.72, italics in original). Butler also undoes modern understandings of religion that reductively construct it as belonging to ‘affective’ rather than ‘cognitive’ domains; this fails to attend to the ways religion works as a ‘matrix of subject formation, an embedded framework for evaluations, and a mode of belonging and embodied social practice’. As we shall show below, the ways our female youth respondents articulated their religious identities did indeed suggest how these involved deep affective bonds that were integral to their being and their social practices.

Finally, this constructivist lens also helps to understand the concepts of nation and ethnicity. In conceptualising the nation as an ‘imagined community’, Anderson (2006) illuminates how a sense of nation depends on the reproduction and re-circulation of shared symbols and narratives. In the construction of narratives of national identity, education systems play a key role. However, it is important to bear in mind that identifications with a ‘nation’ may or may not coincide with the boundaries of a nation-state. Differences in national affiliations can be particularly important in postcolonial contexts, given the relatively arbitrary ways that nation-state borders were often determined, and how ‘official nationalisms’ of postcolonial states could be shaped by local elites, rather than reflecting popular sentiment (Larmer and Lecocq, 2018). The formation of such elites was accentuated by the use of indirect rule in colonial eras. This hardened ethnic (and religious) boundaries by installing particular ‘ethnic’ groups as the agents of the colonial power, while marginalising others (Mamdani, 1996).

In relation to Ghana, a specific example here is the development of structural inequalities in the Northern Region between ‘cephalous’ and ‘acephalous’ communities (communities with or without chiefs). During the colonial eras, non-centralised ‘acephalous’ communities were subjugated under groups which were cephalous and had hierarchical power structures that were more recognisable to the colonisers (Kaye and Beland, 2009). In north west Ghana, Lentz (2000, p.137) similarly describes how colonial authorities inserted the notions of chiefdoms and tribes to understand the region’s diverse social and political structures, all the time remaining convinced that they were ‘discovering’ these tribes, rather than ‘inventing’ them. Over time, such chiefdoms became ‘central locations of power’, to the extent that colonial apppellations (such as Wa and Wala) endure to this day and are used to express belonging and affiliation. Such processes politicised ethnicity throughout Africa in ways that continue to reverberate in local and national politics. Importantly, as key tropes of the colonisers’ distinctions, the ‘ethnic’ and the ‘tribal’ are negative discursive poles against which the civilised, modern ‘nation’ is valorised (Akyeampong, 2006; Larmer and Lecocq, 2018). These axes of difference constructed through history produce multiple configurations of identity, which are sharper for those who are outside dominant religious, gender, ethnic groups – as we seek to explore in our analysis.

**Research methodology and methods**

The research sought to privilege youth voices and involved a total of eight sex-segregated focus group discussions (FGDs) with male and female Muslim youth from an Ahmaddiya Senior High School in the south of Ghana and from the University of Education, Winneba. This sample was opportunistic, being enabled by the existing contacts of the Ghanaian researchers. The research instruments were adapted slightly from those used in a larger four-country study of youth identities in Muslim-majority contexts (Dunne et al, 2017). The choice of FGDs as the main research instrument was to allow open, collective engagement through which participants could narrate their identity affiliations with respect to nation, religion, ethnicity and gender. At the beginning of the
FGDs, biodata were gathered on participants’ age, sex, religious affiliation, ethnicity, main languages, and region. Most FGDs involved between four and six participants and lasted 30 to 45 minutes. A total of 31 females participated in the research, fifteen in higher education (HE) and sixteen in Senior High School (SHS). Female and male participants were interviewed by members of the same sex. After the consent of school gatekeepers was secured, the SHS youth were invited to volunteer to participate in the study. Those studying at university were invited to participate through a snowballing approach in which they self-identified as youth. The mean age of the female participants was 20, within a range of 16-26. Although critical of such ways of defining ‘youth’, the maximum age is slightly outside the UN definition (15 to 24), but within that of the African Union’s Youth Charter (2006) of 15-35. They were of 18 different ethnicities, and included groups associated predominantly with both the south and north. Regionally, participants came from nine of Ghana’s ten regions (at the time of the research), Eastern Region being the only region that was not represented in the sample. Fifteen were from the three regions in northern Ghana (Upper West, Upper East and Northern). In other words, the sample was highly diverse with respect to ethnicity and region, an issue that we return to in the concluding discussion. To the extent that educational outcomes can be considered a proxy for social status, the participants can be considered relatively elite, being in the later stages of secondary education or in higher education in a national context where only 11% of Muslim students complete upper secondary school and 2% attend higher education (UNESCO, 2020).

Each FGD was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The research protocol is available as an appendix in Dunne et al (2017). The questions were open, aiming to generate discussions around youths’ national, religion and gender identities. For example, they were asked what it meant to them to be a Ghanaian national; what their ideals of a ‘good’ national or religious person were, who they revered as national and religious icons, both in general and for females in particular. Throughout the notion of difference was operationalised by asking about the ‘others’ of these identities, for example what nationality participants would not like to have, how their lives would be different if they were not female or Muslim or Ahmadis, or what ethnicities they would not want to be. The interviews were conducted mainly in English, with some use of local languages that was made possible through the involvement of the Ghanaian researchers.

With participants’ consent, the FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed, and interpreted thematically. Our ethical agreements with our participants also guaranteed their confidentiality and anonymity. Excerpts from the interviews are attributed by level of education, where the acronyms SHS and HE refer to participants in Senior High School and Higher Education respectively. We now present our analysis. We begin with the female Muslim participants’ strong embrace of their national identity, and how this national imaginary was gendered. We then turn to their accounts of being Muslim in a Christian country, their experiences of marginalisation, and how this was again gendered. Finally, we take up differences within the Muslim communities of Ghana, emphasising the pluralities of being Muslim in this context.

Embracing Ghanaian national identity
The Muslim female participants in this study proclaimed strong identifications with Ghana both as a nation-state and nation. Such sentiments were commonly voiced across the sample. Despite the stereotypical construction of Islam as ‘anti-democratic,’ the participants took especial pride in Ghana’s record as a peaceful, democratic country, particularly citing recent transitions in power through democratic elections, which they set in opposition to the political instabilities of neighbouring African nations. As the excerpt below illustrates, women were represented as central pillars of the nation and its honour. Their respectability and decency were singled out as visible, embodied markers of national distinction:
... let me say, a good like an ideal national woman, you will not see a Ghanaian, a proper Ghanaian going to a meeting and she is in mini skirt... it shows her dignity, like it shows your respect, once they see you like that they say, “Oh, which country are you coming from?” And you say “Ghana.” You are bringing respect to the nation. (SHS)

Female dress codes were often marked out as key cultural signifiers to indicate the properness of the Ghanaian woman. Such symbolism has a considerable colonial and postcolonial history, as can be seen in Allman’s (2004) analysis of ‘anti-nudity’ political campaigns in Ghana between 1958-1966. Her discussion illustrates firstly how the ‘un/clothed body’ served as a ‘barometer of the success, or failure, of the British “civilizing mission”’ (p.146), and secondly, how women’s dress has remained significant for Ghana’s national image and reputation in post-independence eras (p.153). Critically, her analysis shows how these campaigns emanated from southern (Akan) areas of the nation, and were focused primarily on women in the north of Ghana, in ways that reanimated colonialist, missionary discourses of the ‘tribe’ and the ‘primitive’ we discussed above.

Alongside the emphasis on women as the guardians of the nation’s moral values, they were also constructed as critical to the reproduction of the nation, in ways that implied their positioning within the domestic, private sphere. Such constructions of the ideal Ghanaian woman could also simultaneously invoke religious discourses. In the words of one SHS participant, ‘the ideal Ghanaian woman brings up her children very nicely in a very Godly manner’. The young participants frequently referred to women as responsible for child-rearing and maintaining the home, while in contrast men were constructed as the breadwinners with overall responsibility for the family:

Well, the Ghanaian woman, should I say culturally is supposed to be in the house, take care of the house, the kids and other family matters, whereas the man is supposed to go out there make some money that he can use to cater for his family and he should be the administrator of the house. (HE)

The representation of the ideal Ghanaian woman and man often assumed a hierarchy between them, with the male in a position of dominance, so that being a ‘good Ghanaian woman’ involved ‘being submissive to your husband’ (HE). The dominance of males in the public sphere was also confirmed by those who were cited as being important figures in Ghanaian history. Here male leaders were spontaneously identified, with one frequently cited national icon being the first President, Kwame Nkrumah:

Doctor Kwame Nkrumah, because he led us to independence, and independence made us who we are today, because without independence we will be like this slavery for instance: some of us will send to other countries to work for them instead of us working to improve or develop our nation. (SHS)

The gendering of the national subject and the assumptions of a masculine imaginary were evident. Almost without exception the female participants identified female icons only when specifically prompted to do so in a follow-up question by the researcher. In contrast to the earlier emphasis on female ‘submission’, in the above quote Nkrumah is marked out as male ‘hero’ of the nation in his commitment to achieving independence, both of the nation, and of Ghanaians as free individuals (they are not slaves). In addition to the celebration of masculine assertiveness in association with Ghanaian national independence, this excerpt illuminates the enduring significance of the colonial ‘other’ against which participants constructed their national imaginaries. At the same time, notions of improvement and a trajectory of ‘development’ are assumed as part of a commitment to a modernising, nation.
Despite Ghana’s embrace of gender equality policies, participants’ narratives of their national identities in general suggest the normalisation of patriarchal relations within the ideals of the Ghanaian man and woman. African feminist scholars have pointed to the ways that colonisation radically reconstructed local gender norms leaving behind a legacy of patriarchy. Oyèwùmí (1997), for example, powerfully exemplifies this with respect to Yoruba society in Nigeria. She argues that colonial rule was responsible for the very creation of ‘woman’ as a category in this context, and for introducing the essentialised ‘biologics’ of the ‘Western’ gender system that was to displace Yorubaland’s traditional social norms. Although her arguments are contested (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003), they should encourage caution on the part of western-based NGOs, INGOs and development agencies who claim to bring liberation and empowerment to women in the Global South by promoting gender equality (Spivak, 1988). As many feminists have argued, liberal (western) understandings of gender have themselves assumed a patriarchal division of labour and the subordination of women (Mouffe, 1992).

In concluding this section, we highlight again how these young Muslim women closely identified with their nation, particularly with respect to its peaceful and democratic traditions. It was against the former colonisers that their national imaginaries were constructed. In concert with the gender regimes introduced in colonial times, these Ghanaian national imaginaries were highly gendered. Women were typically looked to as the ‘mothers’ of the nation and charged with its reproduction, materially, morally and symbolically (Coly, 2015). Nevertheless, these female Muslim youth were far from being ‘disaffected’ from their nation.

**Being Muslim in a Christian country**

In turning now to explore their religious identities, the female youth described that being a Muslim had deep significance for them. When asked at the end of the interview which aspects of their identities (national, religious, ethnic or gender) were the most important to them, religion was singled out by the overwhelming majority. Being a Muslim was integral to their being - to the extent that the question about what life would be like if they were Christian often provoked bemusement. Their characterisations of Islam had many common features that refuted stereotypical representations of Islam as associated with violence and religious fundamentalism. Just as participants had valued peace as a national characteristic, and a key distinguishing feature of Ghana’s democracy, many participants stressed that Islam was a religion of peace:

> ... [to] be a Muslim it means you are part of Islamic religion and Islam simply means peace and submission to the will of Allah. (SHS)

Most participants, particularly those in the inter-sectarian and multi-religious Ahmaddiya SHS, felt that Muslims, Christians and followers of animist religions (or ‘traditionalists’) lived harmoniously together in Ghana:

> ... if I were a Christian I would have still been proud to be a Ghanaian, because what binds Ghanaians together is peace and there is peace in my country. [...] if I am a Muslim [I] am allowed to practice my religion, the Christian is allowed and the traditionalist is allowed to carve your wood and go and bow before it... What I want to say is that if am a Muslim and you are Christian, we are all in Ghana, so we are all Ghanaians, so we are one people. (SHS)

Here we see religious and national identities being brought together in ways that stress Ghana’s tolerance of all religions. With respect to gender norms, there were also strong resonances between
the national ideals outlined in the previous section and participants’ religious ideals, as this excerpt shows:

*Islamic* [law] says that men should be the head in terms of everything, so if you go to any institution if you see a Muslim man you will know because he is always the head and as in that company the woman will not talk, the woman is not supposed to say anything, if anything is the man who is supposed to do it. (SHS)

Just as our participants saw Ghana’s national traditions as supposing a patriarchal relationship between men and women, this seemed equally true for gender relations within their religious practices. At the same time, participants also contested any supposed subordination of women, insisting that men and women were considered equal before God, even if having different (complementary) roles in their earthly lives.

While these constructions strongly affirmed their identities as Muslims and Ghanaians, they were also aware of their distinction from the majority Ghanaian Christians. They raised the ways that Islam was often projected negatively in contemporary media and political debates. As articulated by a HE participant:

*They [non-Muslims] think that we are violent and they see us as trouble makers, always causing problems. Even though it is not like that, that is how they see us.* (HE)

This was experienced in more direct personal ways, as exemplified by the account of a SHS participant who had been told by her Junior High School teacher that ‘*[Muslims] don’t like peace at all, we always cause trouble*’. The animosity towards Muslims was also related to ethnic differences, where the Ashanti and the Ga were both singled out by participants as ethnic groups that assumed their superiority, and acted in ways that were disrespectful to Muslims:

*... for instance if you are a Muslim they don’t respect you, they insult you, they don’t know how to talk, I don’t like Ashanti people.* (SHS)

The dress of female Muslims was also a significant symbolic marker of identity through which their identity was put in question in this Christian-majority context. We pointed earlier to the national ‘anti-nudity’ campaigns that were taken forward in the 1950s and 1960s in which covering the body became a symbol of civilisation (Allman, 2004). Crucially, these sensibilities were informed by missionary evangelism and so privileged Christian modes of dressing. In contrast, Muslim ways of dressing, particularly with respect to wearing the veil, could delineate you as ‘weird’:

*They see us to be some kind of weird people in the country, for instance, someone will see you dressed Islamically and the person will be like is this person not feeling hot in sunny weather, you have covered yourself all over...* (HE)

Another participant’s school was reported to have prohibited Islamic dress codes and had obstructed religious practices such as praying:

*I attended a Catholic school. So in that place we were not allowed to cover our heads and even the prayers kora, they didn’t want us to pray. Where we were praying they destroyed it, so you have to hide somewhere and perform your prayers.* (HE)
Different professional environments were also described as hostile to women’s observance of Islamic dress codes, again with respect to covering the head and veiling, in ways that further highlighted the symbolic significance of women’s dress codes within the Ghanaian imaginary of the modern, working woman. Coly (2015) has commented on how dress continues to act in postcolonial contexts as a ‘gauge’ to the modernity of the nation, and its proximity to ‘civilisation, morality and normalcy’ (p.14). In the complex dialectic of colonial and postcolonial discourses, she highlights how the ‘veiled woman’ has also become ‘a rhetorical trope in the Western construction of Muslim societies as backward and in need of reformation’ (p.23). Just as the ‘unclothed’ woman was seen as ‘primitive’ (Allman, 2004), the wearing of the veil is constructed here as an affront to the embodied imaginary of a professional Ghanaian woman.

Overall, in this and the preceding section, we have shown the strong identifications of our female Muslim participants with their nation and with Islam, and how both involved their assertion of values such as peace, harmony and tolerance. We have also shown how gender was central to the symbolic imaginaries of nation and religion in this context, relating this to the ways patriarchal norms were inserted in these contexts during colonial eras, and how these had relegated women to the private sphere, as subordinate to men (Oyêwùmí, 1997; Mouffe, 1992). Finally, we highlighted how gender was integral to the production of young female Muslims as ‘other’ within this predominantly Christian context, and how this again involved a focus on dress, in this case taking up Islamic veiling practices.

**Pluralising Muslim youth identities**

As outlined above, we see it important to resist over-homogeneous representations of Islam (Masquelier and Soares, 2017; Dunne et al, 2020). We now turn to differences in what it meant to be a Muslim in this context, showing how young women differentiated themselves against other ‘Muslims’ who were both internal and external to Ghana, whose status as ‘real’ Muslims was put in question.

We noted in the previous section how our participants resisted any association of Islam with violence. In the FGDs, there was an overriding sense that non-Muslims in Ghana associated Muslims with conflicts in other countries, in Africa and beyond. This in turn provoked strong responses from participants, who sought to differentiate themselves from the ‘Boko Haram people’ as a Nigerian group that they denounced as not ‘real Muslims’. This group was also held responsible for ‘tarnish[ing] the image of being a Muslim’ (SHS). Specifically, in the Ahmadiyya SHS, female participants contested the idea of ‘boko haram,’ or the notion that knowledge or the book were forbidden in Islam. Conversely, they insisted that learning and access to education for women was an obligation within Islam:

... this Boko Haram people, like they are misinterpreting the Quran. Like they say in those times a woman is not supposed to get access to western education [...]. But even the prophet himself said, acquire knowledge even if you have to travel to China, so how do I acquire knowledge and I don’t have access to western education? (SHS)

The importance of being open to knowledge from around the world, whether from the West or China, resonates with historical accounts of the development of modern ‘English/Arabic’ Muslim schools in Ghana by the Ahmadiyya community (Hanson, 2017; Skinner, 2013). However, participants’ accounts showed that such sensibilities were not always shared by the wider Muslim community. Female dress again came into these differentiations. For example, one SHS participant commented on having been criticised for her ‘western’ education by a family friend, and how this was encouraging her to behave and dress in ways that did not respect her own culture:
... she said western education is not good and I asked her which way? And she said, if you go
to school, you learn about western culture, how to dress and she even use[d] my dress as
example; that if I were to be at home, not going to school, I wouldn’t have worn this. (SHS)

In addition to the tensions associated with being a Muslim in Ghana, further differentiations
emerged over what counted as ‘proper’ or ‘real’ Islam within Ghana’s different Muslim communities.
This involved internal inter-sectarian differences and intersections with ethnic identities. In relation
to the former, we pointed earlier to the status of the Ahmadiyya Muslims within the wider Islamic
community, and how they are considered ‘non-Muslims’ in some national contexts. Although there
is no basis for this in national policy, such sentiments led to the exclusion of this Ahmadi participant
from worshipping in some mosques in the capital, Accra:

[near] to my house where I stay in Accra, there is no mosque around and even the mosques
around, they don’t allow me in there, because they say I am an Ahmadi, they won’t allow me
to go to these orthodox mosques.

Although elaborations of the meaning of ‘orthodox’ were not elicited, as an Ahmadi, this young
woman had experienced specific differentiation from the dominant Sunni Muslims in Ghana, which
had put in question her legitimacy as a Muslim:

I don’t know … you feel free to mingle with them, our fellow Muslims, some like this, they will
say, some will say I am the real Muslim, you […] are not a real Muslim. (SHS)

Overall, the issue of who counted as a ‘real’ Muslim arose sporadically through the FGDs, involving
both internal and external differentiations between different Islamic groups. This was sometimes
associated with particular ethnic groups, particularly those who were felt to be converts to Islam,
who were again described as not ‘proper’ Muslims:

... we that feel that we are the real Muslims, we sometimes criticize them that oh, they eat
dog so they are not real Muslim and a Ga he has converted so we say, hmm, he has
converted so he won’t be a proper Muslim. (SHS)

Another female participant described her religious status by saying I am a true Muslim because I was
born in it (SHS). Another associated the concept with Boko Haram with conversion, noting ‘some of
them are not real Muslims, it can be that they’ve converted (SHS).

Overall, at the same time as proclaiming their commitments to their nation and their religion, it was
clear that many of our female participants felt the burden of the negative stereotyping of Muslims in
Ghanaian society, involving associations of Islam with criminality and contemporary religious
conflicts. Internal religious divisions were also apparent within Ghana’s heterogeneous Muslim
communities, which was sometimes intersected with particular ethnic identities. In both cases, we
can see the symbolic significance of gender that goes beyond these young women themselves.
Although recognising the need for further research that explores this in more detail, such axes of
difference can be traced to the different histories of the arrival and spread of particular Islamic
traditions in this context, how these intersected with the values of colonial regimes and what was
later to become the dominant imaginary of the postcolonial (Christian) nation (Akyeampong, 2006;
Allman, 2000; Hanson, 2017; Skinner, 2013).

Conclusions
This study of female Muslim youth identities in Southern Ghana has firstly addressed female Muslim
youth’s national affiliations; secondly their sense of marginalisation in this majority-Christian nation,
and finally their positioning within different Islamic traditions in this West African context. It has shown how female Muslim youth asserted strong commitments to their nationality, despite their minority status. Their religious identifications, the key axis of identity for most, sat in harmony with their national identifications, rather than generating discussions of a religious universal, such as the global *Ummah*. Our analysis also suggests the sense of difference and marginalisation of these female Muslim youth in this Christian majority context. As Masquelier and Soares (2017) also note, young Muslims find themselves having to confront negative stereotyping that associates them with violence and conflict. Islam is multiple rather than singular however, leading to important internal divisions between different Muslim traditions that would appear to derive from their very different histories in this West African context, as well as global stereotypes of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslim (Mamdani, 2004).

Importantly, we also demonstrated throughout the symbolic significance of female embodiments within these imaginaries, whereby young women’s ways of dressing were constantly under scrutiny. Women have been argued to occupy an important symbolic role as the reproducers of national, religious and ethnic collectivities (Mayer, 2000; Yuval Davis, 1997; Dunne et al, 2020). As Mayer (2000: 18) notes, women are constructed as the ‘symbolic border guards’ of the honour of the imagined community of the nation. The intersections of local traditions and culture with a national imaginary also becomes additionally complex in contexts of postcoloniality, given the need of the postcolonial nation to differentiate itself from the culture of its ex-colonial masters (Chatterjee, 1993). This produces the need to emphasise the cultural and religious distinctiveness of the postcolonial nation, which leads to stronger emphasis on what becomes constructed as ‘local’ traditions. Chatterjee (1993) highlights how this redoubles the onus placed on women as the reproducers of cultural and religious values, in the process making them subject to multiple forms of patriarchy. However, the reification of such ‘traditions’ also compounds the marginalisation of women from non-dominant groups.

In presenting this analysis, we are aware of areas that require further in-depth research. This would include extending the research to explore the identity narratives of Muslim youth in other schooling environments, such as mainstream Ghanaian Senior High Schools and Islamic/Qur’anic schools, including within the Zongos. In addition, the complex histories of different religious and ethnic groups call for research that can attend more closely to the ethnic and Islamic affiliations of different youth participants in different regions of Ghana. All of this could potentially benefit from a purposive sampling strategy that specifically attends to the intersections of religion and ethnicity. A key contribution of this article is its intersectional analysis of nation and religion, which illuminated how both are systematically gendered. In relation to ethnicity, and differences within different Islamic traditions in Ghana, the diversity of our sample produced more sporadic insights to the marginalisation experienced by some young women that deserve more exploration.

More generally, the importance of further research in this area has been given additional impetus by contemporary interest within international policy agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the concept of ‘global citizenship’ (UN, 2015). Given the association of cosmopolitanism with liberal, secular understandings of citizenship, it remains to be seen how the associated notion of global citizenship can accommodate youths’ religious identities, including those of minority religious groups (Crossouard and Dunne, 2020). Furthermore, given the historical blindness of the related concept of cosmopolitanism to class, gender and race, it is open to question what traction the concept might have within marginalised, minority youth populations, such as those of Ghana’s Zongos. In addressing all of these issues, we see it critical to take into account the ways in which discourses of colonialism continue to inform the discursive regimes of nation, religion and gender of contemporary postcolonial Ghana.
References


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1 Ghana at the time of the research and this survey was divided into ten regions. In 2018 it was divided into 16 regions, with Northern region being subdivided into three regions.