

American Muslim Women on Campus

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What kinds of religious, ethnic and cultural identities do American Muslim women undergraduates construct? Are these women, in forming their subjectivities, facilitated or inhibited by university climates? How far, and in what ways, do campuses emerge as “diverse” and “plural” in the experience of Muslim women undergraduates?

These are questions I explored in an ethnographic study of 26 American Muslim undergraduate women at two universities in the Washington DC area between July 2002 and June 2003. Ranging from freshmen to seniors, these American Muslim women represented a range of ethnic backgrounds—white, black, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Iranian and Arab. Most were born or raised entirely in the US.

For my in-depth interviews, I asked open-ended questions, allowing participants to talk at length about whatever subject they considered of greatest significance. My main concern was not to foist a research question upon my participants, and not to force any identity upon any of them, so I avoided asking targeted questions in my early interviews.

COMMENTARY

This made for very long, apparently “unproductive” interviews starting with, for example, “So—how’s it going?” Participants that showed little interest in religion, talked about dorm life, dating, racial/ethnic politics, family and occasionally religion. Participants that were profoundly drawn to religion spoke at length about their religious activities on campus.

How Others View Them

A few themes emerged as common among most of my participants. I found that they were assumed to be members of a homogeneous, primarily religious, fanatical community. Muslim undergraduate women are portrayed as shy and oppressed women without agency. Religious practices related to alcohol, cloth-

ing and cross-gender interaction norms are what many Americans use to identify Muslims as “different” from themselves. Due to such practices, Muslim students often become categorized as “weird” or “marginal” in college culture by their peers and even faculty.

In response to such dominant views of themselves, some American Muslim women avoided stigma and marginality on campus by preferring Muslim-only spaces. Colleges are the scene of a great deal of rhetoric about diversity, and the desirability of interracial and interreligious friendships. Most of my participants, however, confided that their closest friends tended to be Muslim.

Stuck in Two Boats

Roshan, a Bangladeshi-American sophomore, told me how she used to go clubbing with her non-Muslim friends as a freshman. She felt uncomfortable because of the drinking and the sexualized environment in clubs, but the alternative at the time was loneliness—the worst disaster of college life. Roshan described how, eventually, the Muslim student group drew her into its fold, and thereby rescued her from a social life of being a non-drinker always accompanying drinkers to clubs.

I would say I was stuck in two boats. Both of my legs [were] on two boats, and I couldn’t get on one boat because I was just one thing and I had to agree with that, and I couldn’t get on the other boat, but I was struggling not to fall in the river. Because I was stuck here not going out with my friends, and my non-Muslim friends would go out clubbing, they’d be drinking: they would be doing all these things. So I would hang out with them but I wouldn’t do everything they did. So I couldn’t go on exactly their road. But at the same time, I was here with Islam, and I knew I shouldn’t do those things. And I was trying to follow Islam, but there wasn’t really anyone to support me there. ... But I couldn’t go there completely because I felt so lonely.

Roshan vividly described the dilemma of a Muslim freshman who was “with Islam” inwardly, was trying to practice the religion, but was stuck in “the two boats” of complete Islamic practice and complete immersion in typical campus culture. She represented the two as incompatible.

To Roshan, constructing a third space in terms of not drinking was not tenable within popular peer culture because it placed her in the uncertain space between an Islamic lifestyle and a full, enjoyable leisure life with her non-Muslim friends. These non-Muslim friends gave her camaraderie, but not in terms of “following Islam.” Roshan felt that a degree of isolation, or withdrawal into private spaces of the Muslim peer groups was necessary to commit fully to an Islamic lifestyle as well as to gain companionship. On becoming an active member of the Muslim student group, she avoided situations that led to cognitive dissonance for her, such as attending clubs and bars.

Creating Third Spaces

Some American Muslim women did create third spaces on campus while resisting dominant constructions. For example, Amira, a Pakistani-American sophomore, attended par-

sage to these people that you can approach someone like me about it.

Amira’s representational work was integral to her social life. Her words betrayed the burden of awareness she carried—that her peers had a static Orientalist image of Muslim women as remote, socially withdrawn, intolerant, uptight and veiled. She therefore made sure to behave in a non-confrontational manner, simultaneously demonstrating the viability of Islamic religious practice. She demonstrated “comfort” in social contexts: many of my participants made a strong effort to come across as confident and socially comfortable—self-consciously “ordinary”—on campus and in relation to the majority of students.

Maintaining Difference

At times, my participants accepted the total difference imposed upon them by the gaze of others on



Photo courtesy of Crystal “Ny’imah” Byrd (www.ibenyimah.com)

ties in bars and clubs but refused to drink. She felt that by doing so, she represented a “tolerant” and “comfortable” Muslim woman, shattering stereotypes about shy, uncomfortable, withdrawn and intolerant Muslim women.

[When offered a drink] I don’t act insulted, or “How dare you!” But it’s like they realize later that she doesn’t drink. ... And it shows to these people who probably have this perception that all Muslim girls cover their heads, all Muslim girls don’t talk to people that are not Muslim, all Muslim girls are very intolerant or uncomfortable—it sends a mes-

campus, and maintained it in their behavior. Often these images of stereotypical difference they performed publicly were not consistent with their individual lives. Some Muslim women and men sat apart from the opposite sex, interacting as little as possible with them at public Muslim student events, even though in their private lives they wouldn’t adhere to such norms. Intisar, a Somali-American participant explained why:

[People] are going to say [about your public behavior], “This is a Muslim girl. This is what they do.” ... Even the discomfort between brothers and

sisters in public. ... There's always people watching. ... Even if they're non-Muslim and they already have ideas about us—then they see us, and their image gets messed up—in a good way sometimes. But then it can be, “Oh my gosh, this isn't what they do.” And here they are, doing high-fives, with brothers and sisters. ... [People say], “Here's a Muslim brother, here's a Muslim sister”—[and they associate] all the stereotypes [with them]—shy, lower the gaze. That's what they want

to see. That's the image we want people to know about Muslims. ... We're the ones that don't allow ourselves to be normal. ... It's almost like they want to shape you into the stereotype they've got: Muslim girls, shy, *hijabi*. We do it more now than ever before.

Muslim students, unwilling to confuse the gaze of others on them on campus, tried to match the “ideal” image others had of them. Post-9/11 realities only aggravated the

situation. Muslims became frozen in an Orientalist fantasy, but some also promoted the frozen fantasy.

American Muslim women students' identities are not singular and static, but shifting and complex. Caught between a dominant student culture, global stereotypes about Muslims, the Orientalist gaze, as well as “conservative” and “liberal” elements within their own communities, these American Muslim students' sto-

ries tell us that they do exercise agency to construct their identities on campus. 

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“The horror! The horror!”

A Response to Stanley Kurtz' “Marriage and the Terror War,” Part I

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Individuals and groups who have something to gain by imposing their interpretation of genealogies upon the social order will strive to do so.

—Dale Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*

When I first learned of cousin marriage and its “evils” in my early school years it was from the story of the Hapsburgs, intermarrying European royals who became, purportedly, after generations of inbreeding, prone to hemophilia and dysfunctional jaws. Now comes Stanley Kurtz alerting us that he will, via several articles in the *National Review Online*, address Muslim cousin marriage, which evidently rather than hemophilia, at least in the case of Muslim parallel-cousin marriage, leads to *group terrorism*!

COMMENTARY

“While,” Kurtz writes, “the character [sic] of Islam itself is unquestionably [Glad he got that settled!] one of the critical forces driving our global conflict, the nature of Islamic kinship and social structures is at least as important a factor . . .” Muslims, Kurtz asserts, by favoring parallel-cousin marriage, tend “to wall off groups from one

another and to encourage conflict between and among them.”

The people who favor this parallel-cousin marriage “can be found in the Islamic cultures of North Africa and west and central Asia,” the limits of the “first Islamic empire,” Kurtz claims. To support his essays, Kurtz resorts to a grab bag of glittering generalities and irrelevant specificities to underline why Muslims are a dangerous “breed.”

Keeping Grounded

As an anthropologist-folklorist and ethnographer specializing in the Islamic (Arab) world, in particular North Africa, I need my theories grounded in examples of actual family situations placed in social and historical contexts. If, in fact, parallel-cousin marriage is not close to all-encompassing in Muslim society, there is no need for me to address Kurtz' larger argument that parallel cousin marriage is “what stands between the Muslim world and modernization.” In such a case, Kurtz' arguments become clumsy, (il)logical leaps based on faulty assumptions and fuzzy categories.

In fact, thinking about the kinship situations of my informants and friends in the Maghrib I observe

a much more complicated phenomenon than described by Kurtz. For example, take the marriage history of a family I have known well for 40 years—a middle-class, for the most part practicing, Muslim family that has inhabited a small town on the Mediterranean, North African coast for several generations.

In this family with four offspring, each of the parents had a grandparent (married during the 1920s) who was neither a cousin, nor Muslim. On one side, the grand-

matches. (In this town marriage to non-Muslims or non-Arabs is not especially unusual. Besides the Turks who intermarried with Arab North Africans, there are within living memory town members, both men and women, whose ancestors took English, Spanish, French, Italian and Yugoslav mates.)

To continue: The offspring, of mixed Jewish, Christian and Muslim, and most likely Turkish and Berber heritage, of these grandparents did not marry kin. Among the family's descendants is one contemporary nuclear family comprised of a man and a woman,



Four of five of Nisceria's granddaughters in one of their apartments—two graduate students and two undergraduates at the University of Tunis (December 2005). Photo courtesy of Sabra J Webber

mother was Maghribi Jewish and on the other side the grandmother was Italian, Catholic—both love

my friend Nisceria, who married in the late 1940s, and their children. The couple, not related, and, remember, with one quarter of their combined heritage not local or Muslim, were brought together by a matchmaker.

Nisceria and her spouse had four offspring, my generation, who are now grown. The eldest is married to a Christian, French woman, the two youngest, to Muslim town

Another Story “They” Tell Themselves

From the marriage history of a middle-class, for the most part practicing, Muslim family from North Africa . . .

A half sister of Nisceria's became engaged in the 1940s. Hearing of the arrangement, the girl's father's brother was upset and indicated that his son wanted to marry this girl cousin. The girl's father gave in to his brother's wishes and told his daughter and the first young man that their engagement was off. His daughter, Nisceria's sister, however, did not give in. She took to her bed and refused to get up until her father let her marry the man to whom she had first been engaged.

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