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Creativity in Young Muslim Women in Germany

“If they want to live in Germany, they have to try to be German”, my elderly neighbor explained, as she kept her eyes fixated on two young women in hijabs sitting a few tables away. We were sitting in an *Eis Café*, an ice cream parlor, on a calm street in Frankfurt—the city with the highest percentage of *Ausländer*, or foreigners. I asked my neighbor what she meant by “German”, and she elaborated, “When I went to Dubai last winter, I was sensitive to *their* cultural norms and dressed accordingly. If *Ausländer* want to remain in Germany, they need to make an effort to fit in with German society, or else everything will be disrupted. They need to give up on their native cultures, or else our society will never be at peace”. As we biked back home, I wondered what it means to be German in Germany and what perception on culture this identity was rooted in? This paper investigates the question, “How do young female Muslim Germans negotiate with the expectations of what it means to be German?” In this paper, I argue that young Muslim German women deal with such expectations by creatively altering existing and crafting new practices to create a dynamic multiethnic German culture.

Historical Context

The Germans have a concept of *Volk*, or nation, which suggests that the basis for the German nation-state is a common descent as the *Die Deutsche Volk*, The German People. After the several periods of war in Europe, the individual German nations sought to unify for various power and strategic reasons. There was a clear rise of German nationalism during the Napoleonic system (Encyclopædia Britannica). The different German nations that were to unite under one singular German identity had a number of religious, linguistic, social, and cultural differences. For many Germans a nation required uniformity, and religious pluralism was not acceptable. This brought a lot of attention to the Catholic minority. In fear of religion hindering a booming German nationalism, the then Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck, implemented a number of policies that limited the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in politics and removed religion education from schools. This move of his was part of the *Kulturkampf*, literally translating to culture struggle, that sought to secularize Germany. This movement, although not entirely successful, allowed for the different German peoples to unite under a singular German-speaking

ethnic identity, giving rise to a new German nationalism (Encyclopædia Britannica). With this secular ethnic-origin significance of being “German”, several issues have arisen in accepting contemporary immigrants, refugees, and their descendants as Germans. Subsidized by the Marshall Plan in the 1960s, Germany brought in a large influx of Turks, and in smaller numbers Moroccans and Tunisians, as guest workers to rebuild West Germany. At first they were brought in as temporary workers, but as they established their new lives in Germany they became a permanent part of Germany. Due to the pervasive concept of the “Germaness”, the “guest workers” and their descendants who were born and raised in Germany were not accepted as entirely German, given rise to the concept of *Ausländer*, or foreigners (Tobergte, 2013). This labor migration was stopped after the 1973 oil crisis; however, later in the 1990s, immigrants and refugees from turmoil areas, such as Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan have fled to Germany. Following the murder of a Dutch filmmaker in 2004 by a Moroccan-Dutch man, there was a lot of controversy around immigrant integration in Germany. The public criticized the idea of “multiculturalism” and Muslims were largely portrayed as national threats (Yuekleyen, 2012). Riding on this wave of Islamophobia, the Christian Democratic Party in Germany reintroduced the idea of a monolithic German culture, *leitkultur* (lead culture), to which incoming Muslims must adapt if they are to remain in Germany (Pautz, 2005). Many surveys have documented the negative sentiments geared towards the Muslim population in Germany (Özyürek, 2015).

Given the clear emphasis on retaining a secular public sphere in Germany, many different political entities try to limit the public expression of Islam. For example, after the French headscarf ban, some states in Germany passed the Law on Neutrality in 2005, which prohibited public employees from wearing religious symbols and garments (Laurence, 2012). Actions such as these promote the idea of a neutral public sphere in which an individual subject is making choices (Özyürek, 2015).

Oliver Roy argues that this secularization is responsible for moving religion into a sphere that is separate from social and cultural aspects of life. This created the fundamentalism that is increasingly popular because it divides culture and religion, creating a “pure” religion that is not tainted by culture. (Roy, 2010). Özyürek points out how this theory misses the racialization of Islam, especially important given Germany’s history of racializing religion, notably Judaism (Özyürek, 2015). This is evident in the increasing numbers of ethnic German Muslim converts who align this “pure Islam” with their German values (Özyürek, 2015). This Islamophobia and

external pressure to mold Islam to fit German values has lead Muslims to rethinking aspects of their Islamic practice in order to adapt to their new home in Germany. There are many examples of German Muslims creatively adapting their Islamic practice based on local conditions they face.

I choose to focus on Muslim women in particular, as women here are of particular interest due to the gendered framing of the migrant Muslim discourse (Chin, 2010). The status of Muslim women in particular communities is as often used to assess the degree of assimilation or integration of communities in Germany. Muslim women are therefore subject to additional scrutiny in mainstream German discourse, in which they are often portrayed as being oppressed as opposed to the freedom granted to women in German culture (Chin, 2010). With this in mind, I choose to focus specifically on how young Muslim women negotiate with such expectations of being German and Muslim and creatively change or construct practices to fit or challenge German norms.

This insistence on a certain “German culture”, and the fixed German identity it promotes, with its distinct ways and values is based on a very static and singular view of culture. However, culture is actually a dynamic and multi-faceted field that is constantly changing as new groups mix and are influenced by local and global forces, especially in Germany today.

Using Asad’s idea of Islam as a discursive tradition in which the tradition of Islam is not static or uniform, but rather perpetually subject to reinterpretation and modification, I will cite a number of ethnographies that investigate the creativity involved in making new lifestyles that incorporate different cultural aspects that Muslim youth value (Asad, 1996).

Ethnographic Analysis

Responses to Othering

My first analysis focuses on Muslim youth creating and altering practices to overcome othering. Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism is based upon the construction of the “other” by the process of “othering” in which a dichotomy is created between the cultures of the East and the West. Though this discourse the West is able to maintain its hegemonic power of the East (Said, 1995). Coming from what is perceived as Eastern cultures by Germans, migrant Muslims in Germany are constantly othered. Bendixsen notes that in response to the “othering” behavior directed towards them by many ethnic Germans, young Muslim women utilized certain tactics to “project an alternative self-image that challenges or negotiates the Othering encounter”

(Bendixsen, 2013). Such othering behavior is typically characterized by unwanted staring in public spaces, passive aggressive comments, and certain changes in behavior and tone directed towards these women. The beauty of these counter tactics are that they are everyday practices that aim to subtly change the dynamic of common social interactions. They can range from being highly individual to being actively practiced and reproduced in groups. Bendixsen, focusing on the tactics consciously employed by the members of the MJD as a group, presents one such tactic that she refers to as the normalization tactic. This tactic seeks to accentuate the behaviors that would be perceived as normal by dominant German culture (Bendixsen, 2013). For example, they alter religious garb in order to be perceived as more normal in the eyes of ethnic Germans. Bendixsen found that many Muslim women actively avoided wearing black during interviews or important social interactions because they feared that black could induce fear in the non-Muslims. Women also made efforts to alter their attire to not be perceived as “too extreme”. In trying to show they are not fundamentalists or oppressed, women often wore bright and matching colors that showed they can be modern and fashionable while also wearing religious attire like a headscarf (Bendixsen, 2013). Employing such color schemes in response to dominant German culture, women creatively altered their traditional practices of wearing black to create a new style of dress in Muslim circles in Berlin.

Localizing Muslim Practices

Muslim youth also display creativity in localizing their Muslim practices. In her article, *Cinderella Wears a Hijab*, Petra Kuppinger attempts to “illustrate how concrete changes are negotiated and have become a part of local practices and a distinct neighborhood ethos of cultural understanding and cooperation” (Kuppinger, 2014). She provides examples of individuals, groups, and institutions that have managed to create platforms and practices that appeal to a range of cultural needs. In this analysis, she focuses not on the burden of migrant Muslims to accommodate themselves to German culture, but rather the collective cultural change that takes place in many, often working-class, urban, and diverse neighborhoods.

One such example includes young Muslim schoolgirls who must deal with the controversial topic of mandatory swimming lessons in public schools. Swimming lessons are a part of the German school curriculum during seventh and eighth grade. This is also a time that children are going through puberty, so Muslim families in this neighborhood often forbid their daughters from attending such lessons. Kuppinger describes a young Afghani-German girl who

would “conveniently forget” her swimming attire or pretend to be ill in order to miss practices. Instead of allowing this to continue, the teacher contacted Muslim parent representatives who talked with the parents about their own daughters who swam in conservative swimsuits that covered the majority of their bodies. The parent representatives went out to buy conservative swimsuits and let the school to keep them for any other girls in the future who may need to borrow them. Kuppinger refers to such instances as the “localization of Muslim practices” that often becomes normalized in diverse neighborhoods (Kuppinger, 2014). This example illustrates the creativity involved in forming new practices that allow for a dynamic multiethnic German culture.

Conflicting Moral Registers

Young Muslim women creatively alter and craft practices in response to conflicting moral registers. Samuli Schielke parallels some of Asad’s ideas about how people within a society can disagree; he writes, “morality is not a coherent system, but an incoherent and unsystematic conglomerate of different moral registers that exist in parallel and often contradict each other”. He argues that the danger of focuses exclusively on a discursive tradition portrays religion as if it were a coherent entity, which “understates the complexity, reflectivity, and openness of [people’s] worldviews and life experiences, especially so in a globalizing world characterized by the registers of consumerism, nationalism, human rights, and romance just as much as it is articulated by the striving for pious discipline and communal respect” (Schielke, 2016). When being faced with these conflicting moral registers, or as Bendixsen describes them tensions and incongruities, these youth display a “creative negotiation of norms and represents ways to resolve the tensions and discrepancies that make up daily life in Berlin”. This essentially poses the question of what happens when German norms are clearly at odds with Islamic norms. Bendixsen, in her analysis of Muslim youth in Berlin, shows how young women choose to live their personal lives in a certain moral ways that differ from Islamic norms without actually contesting the validity of those Islamic norms (Bendixsen, 2013). Interviewing a group of women, Bendixsen finds that they acknowledge that polygamy is allowed in Islam and thus do not disapprove of it. Despite their reluctance to condemn it as a practice, they clearly indicate that they would personally never accept this custom in their own lives. All the women Bendixsen interviewed on this subject had written into their marriage agreements that they would not accept a second wife in their marriages, yet did not contest the right of the man to do so under Islam.

Additionally, these women saw the European critique of the Prophet, who engaged in polygamy, to be a gross misunderstanding. Just because these women maintained the validity of this religious norm, they did not accept it into their own lives. In fact, they indicated that they were pleased that German law did not allow for polygamy to take place (Bendixsen, 2013). This shows how women appeal to a wide array of values in including or excluding certain religious customs in their lives, and do so in a way that does not contest the validity of Islamic norms in other circumstances. Bendixsen cites this as an example of performing a “discursive strategy”, in which while refusing to take up select Islamic practices in their personal lives, women still find them to be religiously valid (Bendixsen, 2013).

Public Life

Muslim youth also engage in creativity when crafting their public life. In her ethnography of Muslims in Stuttgart—*Faithfully Urban*—Petra Kuppinger analyzes Muslims’ public lives to show how multifaceted Muslim life in a German city can be. Kuppinger analyzes two women’s, Amna’s and Sibel’s, marriages. Both women these women identified as piously Muslim and both of ethnic Muslim decent but born and raised in Germany. Looking at marriage as a part of public life, neither of these women followed the cultural traditions that corresponded to their heritage. At the same time, neither followed the local German social customs that involve long-term dating and live-in relationships. Both these women, instead, created novel ways of finding their spouses by combining and creating procedures from their differing social spheres. For example, Amna individually decided that she wanted to get married. She went to local mosques to ask around until her friends matched her with a man, who she ended up marrying after meeting a few times in the context of the mosque. This process did not at all involve the families, which have traditionally played a much more central role in the process of mate selection. Additionally, Amna’s had prioritized piety when engaging in her search, while ignored other factors such as ethnicity and family status. The marriages that Kuppinger described did not follow older marriage argument traditions in which families arranged the match based on family relations and status (Kuppinger, 2015). This practice is a new cultural invention that allows individuals to search for their own spouses while continuing to live what they see to be a pious life. Instead of Islamic piety creating barriers for the youth in participating in German society, their piety actually helps them creatively form new practices in participating in social life.

Personalizing Practice

Young Muslim Germans also alter and create novel practices in attempts to personalize it. Jeldtoft's study of Muslims in Germany looks at how Muslims make sense of Islam in their everyday lives. The Muslims Jeldtoft interviewed were chosen specifically because, unlike Bredixen's informants, they are not part of a formal or organized religious group, but self-identify as Muslim. Jeldtoft describes Muslim women's reconfigured religious practices. For instance, she details an interview with Hafsa, of Iranian descent, who is born and raised in Germany. Hafsa explains how she has adapted her religiosity in her everyday life based on what she says is important to her. She explains, "When it is Ramadan, I only fast on weekends...It is the same with praying. I do it in the morning, but because I can't wash for the other prayers, I just pray inside myself and say 'I am doing it now'" (Jeldtoft, 2011). In this case, Hafsa changed her practice, making it a more personal experience. Jeldtoft notes that many of her interviewees first told her they do not practice Islam at all, but upon further investigation Jeldtoft found that they actually just changed the nature of their practice to be more personal and individualistic. Such practices were practicing Islam within oneself, such as meditating, praying to oneself with one's inner voice rather than out loud, and having internal conversations with God. Here, practicing Islam is made into a private and personal matter rather than a public and communal matter (Jeldtoft, 2011). Jeldtoft presents another useful example of this; Jamileh (25), who also has Iranian descent and was born and raised in Germany. She studied Islamic studies in university and recounts how she that education led her to become more consciously Muslim, but not in the way she would describe as traditional. She explains that she does not fast or pray regularly, however she meditates to Qur'anic suras (Jeldtoft, 2011). Similar to Hafsa, Jamileh has changed more visible and communal ways of praying into personal forms of spirituality. Jeldtoft details how these Muslims adapt and reformulate Islam, putting emphasis on individualism and privatization, creating "eclectic religious behavior" (Jeldtoft, 2011). Jeldtoft suggests that such adaptations to make Islam a more private matter may be a means of making Muslims less visible in the public sphere given their minority status. She suggests that this "can thus also be a minority strategy which works for Muslims to give them greater space to navigate in relation to critical majority discourses on Islam" (Jeldtoft, 2011). Here the Muslim women creatively altered their practice, in response to their minority role in society.

Universalizing Practice

Along with altering and creating novel practices in attempts to personalize it, Young Muslim Germans also universalize their practice. Klinkhammer poses that Muslims who are socialized in Europe are presented with a variety of allegiances and ideals, including secularization and individualization. In response to such ideals, they creatively alter their practices to novel ways of practicing Islam in Germany's dynamic culture. Klinkhammer presents the situation of Ayla to illustrate a universalizing type of Islamic identity. Ayla, daughter of Turkish migrants, started to wear a headscarf at the age of 16 after having to prepare a report on Islam in school. Ayla goes out with her friends as she pleases and intends to marry a non-Muslim man, despite the Qur'an disallowing that. Ayla justifies this by confining her religious engagement to spiritual and personal relationship to God. Privately, Ayla engages in ritual prayer (namaz), but in her best language, German. Additionally, she reports only praying in moments she feels she needs to, rather than scheduled. She often describes her prayers as "meditation" rather than formal prayer. Furthermore, Ayla fashions her headscarf in a European way and accompanies it with trousers and shirts. Beyond being Turkish, Ayla indicates the headscarf shows that she is Muslim. Ayla's public Muslim identity goes beyond this, as she is well integrated within this Islamic social network at her university and claims to do so because it is a space for social support without personal and formal hierarchical structures. This means she can discuss problems with her companions, but is not required to follow their advice.

Being Muslim for Ayla, beyond a personal and private matter, is a means of organizing a support group in her university setting. Similar to Bendixsen's account of the MDJ group in Berlin, these women find social support in these groups, while continuing to practice the majority of their Islam privately. In organizing as such, as Klinkhammer argues, Muslim women stray from formal Muslim organizations that may associate them with traditional or ethnic behavior and strive to be cosmopolitan Muslims. They base their values in their Islamic faith as in common with the many German secular and individualistic values they have been influenced by. The understanding of religion here is one that dictates ethical behavior; therefore making it a universalizing kind of Islam, separate from many traditional practices. Additionally, it is also universalizing because it unites Muslims from different backgrounds, and therefore different traditional practices, into support groups in which their primary identity is not Turkish, as with Ayla, but rather ethnic Muslim. This further parallels Kuppinger analysis of many German Muslims who primarily situated themselves as pious Muslims, and secondarily as German

citizens of migrant descent (Kuppinger, 2015). By collectively changing certain practices, like the form of headscarf and the manner of praying, Muslim women are able to creatively engage with the German identity while remaining ethically Muslim.

German Identity

Aware of this pressure to assimilate into German culture, Moshtari Hilal uses her artwork to challenge the idea of a strict collective national identity in Germany. Hilal is an illustrator based in Hamburg whose illustrations, often portraits, attempt to demonstrate hybrid identities that exist in Germany for second generation Muslims from migrant families (Lavent, 2016). Hilal, herself, was born and raised in Germany and is the daughter of Afghani refugees. In an interview she reflects on her experiences growing up drawing attention to the difficulties she had navigating her seemingly dueling identities as German and a Muslim migrant. She says, “I realized for myself that many of my insecurities and anxieties could be traced back to racist narratives I grew up with as a Muslim refugee girl of color. I tried to hide my Afghan roots, because the only thing German people knew about Afghanistan was drugs and war” (Lavent, 2016). She notes that in response to being stereotyped, she felt ashamed of her heritage and therefore tried to assimilate into dominant German culture as best as she could (Lavent, 2016). Having grown significantly since then, she now tries to use her artwork to counter such tendencies in young Muslim women. While not an example of a new cultural practice, Hilal’s work seeks to show Germans that German culture is not static and that German identity is not fixed. Hilal represents and seeks to empower a whole generation of young Muslim women in Germany, who feel just as Muslim as they do German.

Conclusion

I began writing this paper with the perception that it would be all about the dreadful pressures to assimilate into German culture, but as I wrote the essay it transformed into an investigation, as well as appreciation, of the many ways in which Muslim women are contributing to the cultural reform in Germany. Given the history of the German concept of Volk, German nationalism, and leitkultur, these reforms can be seen with an added dimension of being German in Germany. While Islamophobia and racism is still rampant in Germany today, I found it useful to focus on how Muslim women creatively altered and formed practices based on their identities as Muslims and Germans, thereby developing a changing multiethnic German culture.

My elderly neighbor's call to German Muslims to give up their "native cultures" in place of German culture is simply not an accurate portrayal of the nuanced way in which cultural practices change in response changing demographics and political environments. In place of the concept of a monolithic German culture, *leitkultur* (lead culture), to which incoming Muslims are generally expected to adapt, I find the concept of *dynamischkultur* (dynamic culture) to be more reflective of reality. This notion, instead of framing the issues as the withdrawal from certain practices to distinctly German practices, frames it in a way that highlight the creativity of multiethnic populations in crafting a new and inclusive culture.

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