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Navigating Identity and Solidarity in Violence and Exclusion: The case of Shi'ite women in Brussels

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ABSTRACT

Sectarianism and sectarian violence exist despite the fact that Belgian Muslims are typically seen as a group with a rather unified Belgian Muslim identity. Shi'ites in Belgium are a minority community among Muslims, making them more vulnerable to marginalization and violent attacks. This study examines how Belgian Shi'ite women deal with ideas of identity and solidarity in the face of sectarianism, sectarian violence, and social exclusion using ethnographic data from two interviews. It looks at the (re-)construction and expression of Shi'ite identities as a minority subject to ongoing threats of violence, bullying, and discrimination.

Keywords: Shi'ism, women, sectarianism, solidarity, violence

Introduction

Upon the first glance, the *Islamic Center of Imam Reda* in Anderlecht, Brussels does not look likely to be a place of historical and social importance. Despite having a similar name with a grand mosque in Mashhad, Iran that dates back to centuries ago, it does not look anything like it. Instead, it is a grey European-style three-stories building located in a neighborhood of dense, small residential houses that look just like it, with an old Catholic church marking the end of the street. The only thing that differs it from its neighbors is an ivory-colored marble banner engraved with black text in Arabic and French on top of its dark iron gate, silently announcing the presence of a religious organization inside.

Yet whenever a visitor enters the building, they wuld be immediately greeted by a reminder of an incident that would be remembered by communities. Right in the hallway is a small memorial with items preserved in glass, permanently set up for *Sheikh Abdullah Dahdoh*, a Moroccan Shi'ite cleric who died when an attacker identified as a Salafist attempted to burn down the building with a petrol bomb in March 2012 [1,2]. The event was the first and one of the most known sectarian crimes in Belgium. It was a major shock not only to the Muslim community in Brussels but also for international journalists; hundreds of locals flocked to the neighborhood to mourn, news were spreading on major global headlines. Anthropologist Iman Lechkar happened to be doing fieldwork in Brussels during that period. Therefore, she got some first-hand ethnographic data on the community's response. She later recalls in a 2017 article [3]:

> *"A Sunni Moroccan Belgian had killed a Shia Moroccan Belgian", one interlocutor said, with a controlled, subdued and sad voice. The Belgian media portrayed it as a manifestation of an intra-Islamic conflict, while the majority of the people I spoke to saw it as a terrorist attack; an act of injustice. One interlocutor said, "Terrorist attacks presume Belgian innocent victims, and since the victim was Muslim, mainstream media and politicians don't see it as a terrorist act." [3]*

The incident gradually sparked a sense of unity, and on March 18, 2012, more than 2,100 protesters of various ethnic backgrounds gathered together to march toward Brussels' largest courthouse, the Palace of Justice, calling for justice and transmitting a message against extremism. As they demanded, the perpetrator was ultimately charged with terrorism and intentional arson [4].

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Communities seems to have come together in peace and solidarity as a result of what started as a tragedy.

When I began my fieldwork on the identification and belonging of Shi'ite women in Brussels, this organization is the first place I have visited. It appears to be a blissful corner of the city on a hot summer day, its worshippers kindly smiling and greeting each other as they pass by. At that moment, it does seem that they are not threatened by anyone. Unfortunately, the discussions I have had with my interlocutors in the following weeks have disproven my original assumption. In both collective and individual experiences, sectarian violence, threats, and social exclusion are somehow still quite evident; yet, many people appear to have found novel approaches to negotiate solidarity and identity in the setting of the Belgian Muslim community.

By examining interview excerpts through the prism of Islam as a discursive tradition [5] and sectarianism [6], this essay aims to address those strategies to navigate and adapt. The data presented in this paper are ethnographic interviews conducted in October and November 2022 with two devout Belgian Shi'ite women who are regular visitors to the Imam Reda Center. It is vital to emphasize that this research focuses on subjective experiences linked to sectarian violence and exclusion rather than an assessment of the actual phenomenon.

Conceptualizing Tradition and Sectarianism

While attempting to conceptualize the anthropology of Islam with the notion of discursive tradition, Talal Asad accentuates the sense of subjectivity in a Muslim's perceptions of others, as well as the idea that such perceptions are socially embedded [5]. The same holds true for how people perceive themselves; from an anthropological standpoint, there is no form of Islam that is "more real" or "less Orthodox" than the other. Alternatively, Asad suggests placing orthodoxy at the heart of all Islamic traditions and view heterogeneity in practices as discourses anchored in historical and social settings. This theory serves as the ground for the interpretation of ethnographic data in this paper; rather than comparing sects, this article aims to understand how identity and solidarity are generated in the complicated social environment of inclusion and exclusion existing at the same time.

Sectarianism discussed in this paper is conceptualized in Brewer (1992)'s analysis of sectarianism in Northern Ireland:

> *the determination of actions, attitudes and practices by beliefs about religious difference, which results in their being invoked as the boundary marker to represent social stratification and conflict [6].*

Sectarianism manifests itself on three levels: *ideas, individual behavior, and social structure* [6]. When combined with the concept of *Islam as a discursive tradition*, it could imply that differing interpretations of Islamic principles, practices, and structure of the society lead to boundaries between groups, and hence discrimination and exclusion - along with potential acts of violence and oppression. Yet, this essay would argue that tradition is not the only element fostering Islamic sectarian conflicts in Belgium; geopolitics of the Middle East has also played an important part in determining and dividing between Islamic communities.

Two extra parameters, however, are crucial to the analysis. First off, it's important to avoid exaggerating sectarian tensions in the Belgian context. While confrontations do occur from time to time, they are far from being mainstream. Additionally, as highlighted in Lechkar's ethnography, there is typically no visible, fixed division between Sunni and Shia communities; rather, there is a wide spectrum of perspectives within people who belong to the same sect, even resulting in multi-faith worship places that are sometimes based on ethnicity and attempt to unite both belief systems [3]. Personal judgements and actions are also more complex than bipolar thinking, thus not every action a Muslim takes can be categorically categorized as either totally Islamic or completely unIslamic. Beyond the sameness/difference narrative, analytical thinking is essential in order to understand why some phenomena become problematic [7]. The inquiry in this paper is performed while keeping these guidelines in mind.

Methodology and positionality

The ethnographic project mentioned in this paper was conducted between July 2022 and April 2023, and was framed around the attenders of the *Imam Reda Center,* which is the biggest and perhaps one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse Shia spaces of worship in Belgium. Its attendants are mainly of migrant backgrounds from the Middle East and North Africa, but worshippers from native Belgian backgrounds also partake in various activities there. The fieldwork initially included a series of participant observation and conversations with an interlocutor regarding theology and worldviews; interviews have started to take place since October 2022 mainly with interlocutors that I met at the Center and through personal networks of known interlocutors. The original essay was written for a course, Anthropology of Islam, at KU Leuven, in January 2023. Despite the fact that I have become close to some other interlocutors with migrant origins, the interviews featured in this piece are with two Belgian interlocutors. This is primarily due to the consideration of analytical clarity. Both of the participants describe themselves as native French-speaking Belgian women who converted to Shia Islam.Even though the purpose of this research is to examine the larger phenomena of sectarianism in Belgian society, the interviews covered here only reflect a small subset of Belgian Shi'ite women.

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My identity as a non-Belgian also may also lead to different interpretations of social meanings. As a result, this article does not aim to represent Belgian Muslims as a whole; rather, it concentrates on the perspectives of specific individuals.

Furthermore, there has been a problem with this project from the beginning that could have an impact on the results of the study. The major languages spoken at the Center are French and Arabic, however my communication with interlocutors are mainly in English due to language barriers. Because of the restrictions on my access to the field, only one particular group of people—multilinguals—who may have greater levels of education and/or higher social statuses than many others who lack the ability of spoken English—are included in my study.

The Sunni-Shia divide as discursive tradition

The Sunni-Shia divide is not a modern invention – it is almost as old as the religion of Islam itself, existing long before the concept of sectarianism emerged in social sciences. In fact, the emergence of Shi'ism in early Islamic history is situated in varied opinions of religious leadership, by which the Muslim population of the time became divided into two categories:

the Shi'a themselves believe that the reason for following Ali is that it was required by the Prophet and it was not their personal decision to choose whom to follow, unlike the non- Shi'a who, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, followed the one who was chosen at Saqifah and believed that the Prophet had left it to the people themselves to decide whom to follow [8].

In the centuries to follow, the two categories continued to divide. Differentiation expanded to include a far wider range of community values, ritualistic practices, and other aspects rather than being limited to only the choice of religious leadership. Both sides have created their own schools of Islamic thought, where interpretations and justifications of customs and traditions are produced and disseminated among followers. Islamic schools that are smaller and less numerous have also appeared in diverse historical, social, and cultural circumstances. These variations in how people think about, discuss, and practice religious tradition have gradually given rise to theoretical frameworks that serve as boundary distinctions between religious communities. These people have also laid the groundwork for the modern Muslim World as they migrate, conquer, or settle in various locations around the globe, bringing their traditions with them.

The history of the Sunni-Shia divide has demonstrated how Islam has been established as discursive tradition, constantly progressing through navigating existing concepts and principles in the historical and social environment. However, despite this division, Muslim schools around the world have never been completely apart from or hostile toward one another; rather, as adherents of the same tradition, they have consistently maintained somewhat ambivalent relationships while simultaneously co-creating the *Ummah,* the greater Islamic community.

Becoming Shia In Belgium

Although Muslims have long been a part of European history, it wasn't until the second half of the 20th century that there was a significant Muslim migration from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) to Belgium. The initial immigrants appeared to be predominantly Sunni; the Great Mosque of Brussels, the oldest mosque in Belgium, was established as a consequence of diplomatic negotiations in 1967, when Saudi Arabia was given access to a prestigious facility for 99 years in exchange for oil. This mosque later rose to prominence as Belgium's leading Islamic organization, but in the 2010s and 2020s, it was linked to a number of controversies due to its possible ties to terrorism.

The Shia population of Belgium was largely unnoticed until Iran's Islamic Revolution took place in 1979, which significantly helped Shi'ites promote their presence. In addition to the increasing number of immigrants with historically Shia origins, some native Belgians have also become drawn to Shia Islam. One of my interviewees, Isabelle, recalls vividly her teenage encounters with Muslims and Shia Islam:

When I was a teenager, the first Moroccan family came to our city, and my parents went… to know about them. And then, I saw that they are Muslim and I learned a little about Muslims from them. And I saw that there is some interesting value that we lost in Belgium, like respectable forums, solidarity, fasting, helping the other people… and I was 15, 16, or 17 years old, I also met some other people and I started to read about some people from some books, (including the) input from important people…

- Isabelle, November 11, 2022, in-person interview in Brussels

Isabelle, a Francophone Belgian who grew up in a pious Christian family, became curious towards Islamic traditions thanks to such encounters. The Shia Muslims that she was in touch with introduced her to the works of Iranian thinkers, among whom *Morteza Motahhari* (1919-1979) and *Ṣadr ad-Din Muḥammad Shirāzī* (1571-1635). In reading these works, she gradually became inspired by these philosophies that expressed openness to modernity while remaining traditional; she eventually decided to embrace Shia traditions approximately in 1982.

The expanding Muslim population in Belgium increasingly increased its influence throughout the ensuing decades as well.

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Another interviewee, Valerié (42, a francophone Belgian), discussed how the abundance of media about Islam led to her conversion:

I converted, I think, nine or ten years ago. I was Christian… I studied, I studied books (about Islam) by myself. I read books, and I watched on television, debates between Christians and Muslims. And I was interested in it because it gave me a lot of explanations about the religion (of Islam) before (my conversion), and then I converted.

- Valerié, October 22, 2022, in-person interview in Brussels

Both Isabelle and Valerié identify as Belgian Shia converts, and regard their faith to be an integral part of who they are as individuals. Their conversion is strongly related to the emergence and growth of Muslim communities in Belgium, and their religious experiences are greatly affected by those who belong to the majority of these populations, namely the migrants from the MENA region to Europe. Both of them have formed families with migrants. Although hard to estimate the scale, children from Muslim migrant families also often end up having the same faith as adults. Overall, the development of the Shia community in Belgium has been a lengthy process that has spanned several decades, and personal experiences are strongly linked to the growth of the community.

Expression, Solidarity And Sectarianism

The Shia community in Brussels has grown significantly over the last few decades, yet since its inception, it has experienced numerous difficulties. Both of the women in this study had at some point in their life encountered some type of sectarian prejudice or exclusion.

Isabelle's navigates her social life by specifically referring to women in Shia traditions, inspired by the works of *Motahhari* and stories of *Fatima Zahra* and *Zeynab*. Being bilingual of French and English, Isabelle collaborates with a group of like-minded women, celebrating Shia identity in the neighborhoods of Brussels in the form of book clubs and commentary. At the same time, she also actively participates in activism, empowering Shi'ite women combining tradition and legal knowledge. Such seemingly positive actions, however, was unwelcomed by some:

I will give you two examples… We lived (in) this situation, I think, in 2000. We wanted to put review in (an) Islamic library, and when they saw the books, they said, it's Shia, it's Muslim, but we don't want to have this book in our library. Secondly, my friend, she works in (an) Islamic clothing (store). She put books in her shop, and some people came and told her, you have Shia books here, you have to take them out, if you don't do it… we'll tell people not to come to your shop.

- Isabelle, November 11, 2022, in-person interview in Brussels

Despite occasionally experiencing sectarian discrimination, Isabelle insisted on active social participation, and eventually became a public figure representing the Shia community at the Muslim Executive of Belgium in 2008. However, following the mosque tragedy in 2012, she began to feel uncertain about her safety in public, realizing that Middle Eastern politics have a significant impact on the social standing of Shia Muslims in Belgium. *For a lot of Shi'ites, it's not easy for them to live in the Muslim society,* she explains, *because of the Daesh (ISIS) and the problems in Syria.*

In addition to disagreements over political and religious beliefs, sectarianism also seems to have a substantial impact on how people express their identities in the educational system. Isabelle, working at the Muslim Executive during the 2010s, noticed how Shia traditions were excluded from education:

When I was a chief at the Executive, we had the right to have Shi'ite teachers for children. But it was not possible. And the Executive chose teachers and gave formation to teachers. But I know some Shi'ite teachers, they were not working like (to represent) Shia, they were working like (to represent) Muslims; and their inspector of teachers told them that it is forbidden for you to speak about Shia (Islam).

- Isabelle, November 11, 2022, in-person interview in Brussels

Valerié, a mother of three school-age children, also noticed the absence of Shia knowledge in schools:

My children are not going to the religious class at school. Official school, there is religious class, but it's Sunni. We don't have one (that is Shia)… (despite dissatisfaction from Shi'ites) We don't have any place in public things to make a Shia class.

- Valerié, October 22, 2022, in-person interview in Brussels

Shia identity in Belgium is somewhat marginalized by a lack of representation, and the possibility of bullying makes it increasingly harder to express affiliation. While Valerié openly celebrates her Shia identity, she tries to keep her children away from sectarian conflicts by hiding their sectarian affiliation in the public context:

I don't mind, because I'm big and I can defend myself. But my children, they are in school. Most of them (students) are Turkish people and Sunni. So I tell my children, don't say we're Shia, we don't want to have problems at school… They are small, they cannot defend (themselves) for the moment. When they're big, (then) there's no problem.

- Valerié, October 22, 2022, in-person interview in Brussels

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By hiding boundary markers, Valerié and her children avoid confrontation and foster peace with others who are different from them. Instead, she and her children find comfort in interacting with members of the Shia community, where they do not have to hide a part of themselves and express in the way they want. We only want to be free to have our religion, she adds, stressing the desire for equality amongst various Islamic traditions in Belgium.

The experiences of Isabelle and Valerié have demonstrated how sectarianism affects the expression of identity. These sectarian boundaries are defined by discursive tradition, but at the same time enforced by politics. While Belgian Shi'ite women are open about their sectarian identities, they are still occasionally concerned about sectarian discrimination and violence. While they employ different strategies to deal with sectarianism and sectarian conflicts, they both call for equality and recognition.

Discussion

Is Solidarity A Solution?

At the end of their interviews, both Isabelle and Valerié expressed their wish for solidarity. Isabelle believes that social activism would be a way to improve the social status of Shi'ites in Belgium:

In Shia community, we have to be active to take our place right here and to be active everywhere. Because men and women have to work together from every level in society, to change the world to be better. We'll live to change the programmed domination.

> - Isabelle, November 11, 2022, in-person interview in Brussels

Valerié believes that mutual understanding and respect are the keys to solving problems of discrimination. She calls for a revisit to the core of religious traditions:

The most important we are all human beings and we have to respect. Everybody has a brother or sister, because we are all brothers, sisters, human, (even) after everybody make his own way and choose what the thing is today… I respect all kinds of ideas but I don't accept people who are not treating others well religiously or whatever. We have no right to treat anyone this is the basic thing in the religion, to bring love and respect otherwise there is no reason to do that (practice religion).

> - Valerié, October 22, 2022, in-person interview in Brussels

Either in individual and collective behavior or in thinking, both of them seem to agree that solidarity would be the key to ending sectarian violence and exclusion. But such solidarity is never easy: these two interviews show that after the protest in 2012 that brought communities together, discrimination and bullying are still occurring. While Shi'ites are occasionally excluded and discriminated against as a minority, they are just a part of a much bigger population that faces violent threats. In the meantime, Violence also has become a threat that is visible beyond the Muslim communities of Belgium. After two terrorist attacks organized by ISIS took place in 2016 that claimed the lives of dozens of innocent civilians [9], the state has also tightened its grip on extremism. In 2017, links between the Saudi control on the Great Mosque and the rise of Salafism became a hot topic of debate within the political arena [10]. The Muslim Executive, a group intended to foster unity, became embroiled in a scandal of opacity and outside interference, and its authorization was ultimately terminated in 2022 after a series of investigations [11].

The Belgian state is ambitious in resolving problems that exist within and around the Muslim communities in the nation, working to counteract outside influences and establishing new channels of Muslim solidarity. What lies ahead is still a mystery at the nexus of tradition and post-modern politics, unfortunately.

Conclusion

This essay looks into how sectarianism, violence, and exclusion affect how Shia identities are expressed in Belgium. Sectarian conflicts in Belgium are deeply rooted in discursive tradition, and strongly influenced by international politics. While there are some cooperation, coexistence, and solidarity amongst various groups of the same tradition, there are also gaps in beliefs, individual conduct, and social structures, which are what causes the sectarian problem [6]. Recognizing the obstacles that Shia Muslims experience in Belgium does not imply that one should view the Shia community as a perfect social group that exhibits zero hatred. Every community, whether religious or not, faces various challenges. But in order to envision a future that embraces diversity, it is essential to understand the inequity or injustice that a community faces.

As migrants settle, interact and become a part of the Belgian society, and as an increasing number of Belgians and foreigners convert to Islam in the Belgian context, they add diversity to the Muslims of Belgium. Finding a means to accommodate such diversity would be inevitable. While this paper does not aim to propose a solution to the sectarian dilemma, it invites readers to acknowledge the inequality that exists as a result of it. As *orthodoxy lies in the core of all Islamic traditions* [5], seeking means to tackle sectarian conflicts would certainly not mean to abandon or abolish certain traditions, but to find ways of mutual respect and co-existence by revisiting traditional notions. And such a search would have to take time and effort from all levels of the society.

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