Muslim Identities in the Banlieue

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In the face of increasingly vocal minority initiatives, Europe is trying to come to terms with its diversity. Integration has become the buzzword of almost a decade of politics. The Dutch are trying to reconcile the face-cover with its traditionally liberal social policies, the British are re-evaluating the meaning of a multiculturalism that many fear has gone too far toward balkanization, and since 2004 the French have banned religious symbols – most notably the Muslim headscarf – in public schools across the country.

Drawing from the voices of young Muslim women living just south of Paris, this article argues that Muslims are developing a form of Islam shaped by French customs, values, and institutions. The development of this form of religiosity is apparent in the way French Muslims negotiate their multiple identities. In this process, space plays a crucial role in the form of the banlieue.

Although Muslim groups have not been the only minority communities in question, many of the debates have focused on the building of mosques, education, and religious manifestation and attire, including the headscarf. What permeates these discussions is an expectation that as the minority group, Muslims are expected to adapt their behaviours to meet the socio-cultural norms of the society. These discussions, however, fail to consider the intricacy of identity. This is particularly, but not exclusively, so for second and third generations of people with a background of immigration.

Identities

The expectation of integration of Muslims begs the question, what does integration in France mean for a group of approximately four and a half million people, many of whom are second and third generation French nationals whose parents or grandparents hark from 123 different countries?[1] They come from diverse regions with varying ethnic,

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cultural, linguistic, social backgrounds. This variety equips them to understand religion and its importance – or lack thereof – in distinct terms that affect the way they understand themselves in relation to the wider socio-political framework. But this is the case only for those who have a direct experience of immigration, which many (if not most) do not have. Many people commonly referred to as people *issu de l'immigration* are in fact French nationals; bred, born, and educated. Some of them argue that a Muslim may identify as both Muslim and French (and woman, man, student, etc.) and show that they are in constant negotiation within these identities. Stephanie, a young convert to Islam made this clear during our conversations in her apartment located in one of the rougher neighbourhoods just south of Paris. I asked her to explain what it means to have to integrate into the society of her birth.

I met Stephanie at a weekly prayer group where approximately ten women would meet to discuss the Quran and the realities of faith in their daily routines. All of the women had a different background to share: recent immigrant, not-so-recent-immigrant, local, or a French/Other mix. All of them wore some sort of head covering, either a bandana-like scarf tied just around the hair, a loose fitting scarf that enveloped the head and neck, or a black headscarf that tied closely around the head, neck, and body.

Stephanie stood out during the first meeting because of her stunning and, at times strongly worded, opinions about how she and her veiled Muslim sisters were treated on the streets of France. "We're spit on, and harassed," she said while the others nodded in agreement. The veil, they very clearly voiced over many hours of discussion, was for them a religious obligation and a choice they made when they were ready to accept the responsibility in light of the general and employment discrimination they would face. This is not to say that all women are able to make a free choice to veil; some may succumb to social pressures. At the same time, the veil also protected them from the violence they encountered on the streets of the banlieues they all lived in. The veil, they said, "Serves for many things. For one, it shows obedience to God … and it protects you from nasty looks … if you take two women, one who is dressed up all sexy and the other who is covered from head to toe … the one who will be yelled at and shouted out to [by the young men on the street] is the one who is not veiled."

Banlieue

It is here where the borders of the banlieue are important and show a marked difference between the culture that exists inside and outside these imaginary walls. These spaces encourage a distinct culture to flourish and this further enhances the feeling of separateness. Living inside this particular environment is one factor that helps develop an Islam of France.

Inside the banlieue, the veil protects because it covers women and renders them less prone to abuse or harassment. Some women told me that the veil made them feel invisible to harassers and provided them with a certain security. Outside the banlieue, however, the veil is a liability.

Outside the banlieue, the veil is a sign of a lack of integration, an unwillingness to meet the basic standards of what it means to be French. The veil, for many non-Muslims, is not just symbolic of a religious belief, but is, at best, considered a sign of non-integration. The veil renders the women more visible by the very fact that they stand out. In speaking to non-Muslims, I came to understand that for many of them, the veil is symbolic of an "other" who is dangerous in her ambiguity and foreignness.

The geographic distinction between banlieue and non-banlieue is critical; for there is a specific culture of the banlieue that helps shape individual decisions to veil or not to veil. These areas generally exhibit increased public and familial violence, lower educational achievement, and higher drug presence.[2] There is a culture all its own. Students from this neighbourhood, for example, developed their own pigeon-French language which they learned to speak so quickly that even native French speakers could not follow what they were saying. Many wore loose fitting, white or baby-blue exercise suits that buckled at their shoes and hung from far below their waists. They walked to school in groups of two to four and would speak in raised voices and demonstrate their points by physically touching or shoving their conversation partners. These types of interactions differed from how individuals from non-banlieue areas would behave.

This culture is important because it helps form, although it does not solely determine, how some women view veiling. It is also important because this environment is specific to France and thus helps foster a particular setting in which Muslim women make decisions on the manifestation of faith. That is not to say that there are not other areas in Europe which host a high percentage of Muslims and where a distinctive culture has developed. However, France is exceptional because of the way the state has managed and (in many cases) sponsored the building of large housing estates post World War II.[3] The irony that these neighbourhoods – many of which have degenerated considerably over the last decades – were built largely by foreign workers whose descendents now call them home, is not lost on these generations.

PHOTO BY JOEL ROBINE / © AFP, 2005

**French girl
selling** "**Dawah
Wear**"

Personal capacity

Each woman I spoke to made the choice to veil or not to veil. The differences were the result of a symbiotic relationship between this specific French context and their personalities, value orientation, and personal history. For example, Stephanie chose not to veil while her sister-in-law took to wearing the veil a year ago. The manner in which each person professed her faith lay in her understanding of herself, her history, family, comfort level, and ability to sustain the (at times) negative repercussions of being part of a visible minority. What was common to them all was that they believed that religion should not be difficult. As Stephanie said, "Religion is easy – it just has to be adapted to your situation. God said that when I give you a situation, do what you can … but it should never be hard for you, that's not the goal." Thus, the veil as it is worn, or not worn, by the women is in some ways uniquely "French" because they are responding to the specific context in that country. A friend of Stephanie's explained it to me in this way: "We try to advance with the Quran and there are people who take it more or less seriously. There is a verse in the Quran which says that God gives to each according to one's personal ability … you see the women outside who are completely covered? God has given them the capacity to wear all of this … with the gloves and all that. Personally, I'm still too little for that. I don't have the courage to do that … All of these things, we try to progress with all of this, according to each of our own capacities."

This understanding of each according to her capacity or ability is an important notion used by the women to sustain, encourage, and support their understanding of religious duty balanced with what they see as "fitting in" to French society. The women explained that they each had the responsibility to understand their own histories and situations and made a determination on the manifestation of faith based on this complete picture. If someone did not feel strong enough to wear the veil given the harassment, or, if she needed to work and this proved difficult because of the veil, she might make her choice based on these series of factors. That is not to say that these decisions would be made lightly or necessarily involved removing the veil, but this understanding of capacity would allow them to decide for themselves. This negotiation with the local culture can be seen as the development of a "local Islam," as Leila Ahmed argues.[4] This is an Islam *of* France as opposed to an Islam *in* France.

It is through using this logic of capacity that the rules decreed by religion are negotiated – within the context of socio-political institu-tions and social expectations. Thus, the women agreed that it was reasonable to expect them to remove the veil when picking up children at school or when posing for identification papers or to be treated by a male physician at the hospital. They were very well aware that certain concessions had to be made because they are living in France.

Integrated identities

The women were clear about the concessions and equally as lucid about their boundaries. They drew the line, for example, at the prohibition on getting married in a veil or veiling in school. By not allowing young women to veil in schools, French society is making them choose between religion and education – an impossible choice, they thought. Stephanie, in her typically provocative manner, conveyed her frustration, "I understand that they [educators] are sick and tired of the issue and that they don't give a shit … but if we need to suppress everyone's liberties, then that's what I call a dictatorship."

Identities are complex and are themselves reflections of the incorporation of various cultures within the individual. In addition, there is, as Stephanie and her friends demonstrate, a trend toward the development of a specifically French Muslim culture and manifestation of faith – a local Islam. It is distinctively French because of the negotiations made by believers that both limit and express their faith in this particular socio-political context. The reality of integrated identities and the development of a local Islam show that it is problematic to focus on integration as a means to reconcile religious and cultural diversity.

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Notes

1. J. Laurence and J. Vaïsse, *Integrating Islam: Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 16-19.
2. Ibid. 38-39.
3. Ibid. 35-43. See also Hacène Belmessous, *Mixité sociale, une imposture: Retour sur un mythe français* (Nantes: Atalante, 2006).
4. Leila Ahmed argues that, "meanings of hijab … are intensely local." See L. Ahmed, "The Veil Debate – Again," in *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2005), 153-171.