Sifting, negotiating, and remaking cultural and religious practices and identity: the experiences of migrant Muslim women in Australia

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Abstract

This paper examines the outworking of religious identity and practice among women from two Muslim majority countries, Iran and Turkey, who have migrated to Brisbane, Australia. The paper is based on in-depth interviews with 37 Iranian and 25 Turkish migrant women and follow-up interviews with nine of these women, seven years later. It was found that many women had undergone changes in their religious and cultural identity and practice. Words such as ‘sifting’, ‘negotiating’ and ‘remaking’ describe the process of meaning making which underlined the changes to the women’s identities.

‘Lived religion’ is also a key concept in understanding how women’s religious practice and identity has been shaped through their daily lives. McGuire (2008) explains that lived religion is centred less on religious ideology and more on religious practices which need to make sense in the daily life of the individual. These religious practices also need to be seen by the individual as being ‘effective’ and achieving a desired result. This can be clearly seen in the daily religious lives of many of the women interviewed.

This research examines women from two Muslim majority countries, Turkey and Iran, who have migrated to Brisbane, Queensland. I am focusing on Muslim women’s ethnic and religious identity and practice and how this changes through the act of migration and
living in a secular country such as Australia. Women from Iran and Turkey have been chosen for this research because these countries demonstrate strongly contrasting modes of incorporating Islam into society. One is the most famous secular Muslim majority society and the other is a strict Shi’a Islamic society governed by Shari’a law.

Sixty-two Muslim female immigrants were initially interviewed during the period 2003 to 2005, comprising of 37 Iranian and 25 Turkish women. Women were interviewed about their religious and cultural attitudes: (a) before migration; (b) after migration; and (c) following significant political events – 9/11, the Bali Bombings and the Iraq war. The research methodology used was a semi-structured questionnaire that took from one to one and a half hours to administer.

The oldest Iranian interviewed was 52 years and the youngest was 18 years. The oldest Turkish woman interviewed was 62 and the youngest was 20. The average length of time living in Australia for the Iranian cohort was 8 years and 2 months, with a time span ranging from five months to 19 years. For Turkish women, the average length of time dwelling in Australia was 11 years and 10 months, with a time span ranging from one year to 34 years. Sixty-two per cent of the Iranian women had a university degree compared to 24% of the Turkish migrants.

‘Sifting, ‘Negotiating and ‘Remaking’

After the first interviews it was found that many women had undergone changes in their religious and cultural identity and practice. Words such as ‘sifting’, ‘negotiating’ and ‘remaking’ described the process of meaning making which underlined the changes to their identities. From the first round of interviews it can be seen that many of the migrant Muslim women, now living in a multicultural western society, were re-evaluating their lives on a number of different levels (Krayem 2010). The women described in a number of different ways the process of ‘sifting’ that was taking place in their religious and cultural lives. Several women expressed their delight in living in a multicultural society, where freedom of religion was enshrined, enabling them to learn about different religious worldviews, which for many led them to examine their own Islamic religion. Culturally, women were observing how others in their community practiced hospitality (including
the amount of food being served), reared their children and how wives and husbands related to each other, and were deciding for themselves what cultural practices were relevant, useful and important in their daily lives. This sifting process led many to negotiate aspects of their religious and cultural life. Among the areas observed from the first interviews where religious identity and practice were negotiated were: the hours fasted through Ramadan; the number of times the women prayed; the format and language used to pray; the decision to wear or not wear the hijab; and the frequency in attending mosque. Some of the cultural areas that the women negotiated included their position in the household and issues of equality, separation and divorce; and verbal communication issues such as speaking directly about matters. Women explained that these negotiated aspects of their religious and cultural life were due to internal and external decisions, circumstances and choices surrounding their new life in Australia. Some of these negotiations will be further expounded in the case studies in the next section of the paper. The sifting process for others led the women to remake aspects of cultural and religious life. For some, this meant changing their religious identity and following another religious worldviews such as Christianity or Buddhism. For other women, it caused a dramatic strengthening in their Islamic world view and religious practice, where women for the first time in their lives wore the hijab and observed salah (structured form of prayer practiced five times a day, also written as salat (Shepard 2009)). Culturally women remade practices such as changing the way they entertain visitors to ‘a more relaxed Australia style’ where the burden of providing large amounts of food to guests was considerably lessened. Other studies have documented the fluid and hybrid nature of migrant Muslim women’s religious and/or cultural identities (see McAuliffe (2007), Gentles-Pear (2007), Ewing (2008) and Ehrkamp (2005)). Marranci (2007) found that Muslim women in Northern Ireland formed Muslim women’s circles and through these groups Muslim women re-processed their religion into “an innovative act of identity rather than a conservative element in their lives” (Marranci 2007:90).

Follow-up Interviews
In order to investigate the concepts of ‘sifting, ‘negotiating’ and ‘remaking’ more fully, nine follow-up interviews were conducted in May and June 2010 to examine further
changes to the women’s lives in the areas of religious and cultural practice and identity. Follow-up interviews were conducted with five Iranian and four Turkish women. The nine women who were chosen represented a spectrum of different religious and cultural identities from the initial interviews. Two women identified as strongly Islamic in their religious practice, two had decided to change their religious identity, one Turkish woman no longer wanted to be identified with her diasporic community, one Iranian woman was distancing herself from her Islamic identity, one Turkish woman was working such long hours that she had no time for religious and cultural activities, and two women were struggling with wearing the hijab and identifying as Muslims in Australian society. Six of the women were re-interviewed face-to-face and three were interviewed by phone.

By conducting follow-up interviews in 2010, women’s lives may also reflect and be affected by changes that have occurred in their homeland over the past seven years. These effects can be experienced through, among other things, trips back to Iran/Turkey, phone calls, email, and hearing news of current events and experiences of loved ones. Turkey, in the last seven years, has experienced a political shift away from secularization, when in 2003, AK Party leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan became Prime Minister. The secularist military is in constant friction with the Islamist AK Party, whom they believe has an agenda to derail the country’s secular system (Hardy 2010). Iran in 2003 was undergoing a period of reform under President Khatami (1997 to 2005). Amnesty International reported in 2009, thirty years after the Iranian revolution, that during 2003 there was a reduction of restrictions on freedom of speech. However the situation in Iran has considerably worsened since the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Amnesty International reports that torture, impunity, and use of the death penalty have increased. Under President Ahmadinejad, conditions have also significantly deteriorated for ethnic and religious minorities who face widespread discrimination (Amnesty International 2009). After the disputed elections and public outcry in 2009 when Ahmadinejad was elected for another term, Human Rights Watch reported that Iran was an even more closed society than before the election, where protestors have been forced underground (Human Rights Watch 2010a). These events outlined in Turkey and Iran are closely followed by the diasporic communities in Australia. This was evidenced
by comments during the first interviews and the follow-up interviews of several Turkish women who expressed fear and distain that the Turkish government was becoming more Islamic and were glad they were no longer in Turkey. Many Iranian women also voiced their opinion strongly about their anger towards the Islamic government in their homeland. Some stated that as a result, they had shed their Islamic identity in Australia because of the perceived increasing levels of mistreatment, corruption and violence against individuals perpetrated by the Islamic Iranian government. One woman stated, “If this is Islam, we want nothing more to do with it.” Thus it can be seen that external events in the women’s homeland still have an effect on the interviewee’s religious identity while living in Australia.

Lived Religion and Lived Culture
After conducting the follow-up interviews, it was found that the process of sifting, negotiating and remaking in the outworking of religious, ethnic and cultural identity and practice in the lives of the women is constantly ongoing. The women’s religious and cultural identities are fluid locations in social and cultural space which are negotiated and renegotiated, and are a snapshot of the women’s lives at the time when interviewed. An important area of focus is the outworking of the women’s religious lives and is reflected in the term ‘lived religion’. The term ‘lived religion’, as Streib et al (2008) explains, is based on how people live their religious beliefs and practices in their daily lives. ‘Lived religion’ is “the religiosity of individuals and groups as embedded in the contexts of life-worlds and biographies.” (Streib et al 2008:x) In her book, titled, “Lived Religion”, McGuire (2008:4) challenges religious sociologists not to focus on individual participation in organized religion but poses the question, “What if we think of religion, at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important?” Orsi (1997:7) agrees and argues that the study of religion is best observed by focusing on men and women in their daily routine “in all spaces of their experience”. This translates as how religious life is negotiated in the workplace, as well as in the church, in the home, sporting club and also the mosque or temple.
McGuire (2008) explains that in modern society, more and more people are choosing not to practise a sole religion enshrined with all its institutional beliefs and practices, but are practising a mixture of different religious belief systems and worldviews (thus someone could claim to be an Anglican who practised Buddhist meditation) (McGuire 2008). Although the term “lived religion” refers to the individual, it includes the “lived” religious experiences and the resultant “intersubjective reality” shared with others (McGuire 2008:12). In discussing the “logic” of lived religion, McGuire (2008:15) explains that “religion –as-lived” is centred less on religious ideology and more on religious actions which need to make sense in the daily life of the individual. These religious activities also need to be seen by the individual as being “effective” and achieving a desired result. This concept will be explored in the lives of the following two women profiled.

Profiles
The profiles of two women who participated in the follow-up interviews will be documented in order to gain a clearer insight into the outworking of lived religion and the process of sifting, negotiating and remaking and the resultant changes to religious and cultural identity occurring in the women’s lives. Names used in these profiles are fictitious.

Faize
In the first round of interviews, Faize was a young 24 year old Turkish Muslim woman who identified as ‘religious’. Married to her first cousin when she was 19, Faize had been in Australia for four years and had a three month baby son. She wore the hijab, prayed five times a day, read the Qur’an daily and fasted through Ramadan. She was also active in Turkish cultural activities. Her dream was to work hard in Australia so her and her husband could own a kebab shop. When I talked to Faize nearly seven years later, she was now living in her parents’ home after being separated from her husband for almost a year, and had a daughter who was four years. I wondered if she was still fervent in her devotion to Islam, and I learnt that she feels she has become more religious since coming to Australia, and this feeling has increased after her separation. She commented, “This is
because the religious community is not around (as in Turkey). Sometimes when I feel lonely and can’t feel anyone around me, or angry, I practise my religion.” She still prays five times a day and rises between 4.00-4.30am for the first prayer. Even at her part time employment she stops to pray at the required time. Since her separation she reads the Qur’an more often. Faize comments, “I read it (the Qur’an) once or twice a day. I get comfort from it – I feel good and relaxed. I like reading it more because I have time (than in Turkey).” Faize’s Turkish Muslim identity is very important to her and she wears the hijab constantly. For Faize, ‘lived religion’ is seen through the act of daily drawing strength from her religious practices and faith which empower her to live life with all its challenges.

In the first interview Faize expressed that it was very important to keep her culture and not lose it, especially for her children, whom she wanted to grow up with a strong Turkish Muslim identity. In the follow-up interview, when Faize was asked, “Can you describe the culture you feel you belong to?” She replied, “I am really lost. I don’t know who I belong to. I am not sure what culture I belong to. I do feel more Turkish than Australian.” Notwithstanding, Turkish cultural activities are important to Faize and she actively practices her culture by living in a Turkish household and cooking Turkish food, listening and dancing to Turkish music, and celebrating Turkish festivals with other Turks four or five times a year. Faize derives social capital from these cultural events, as Esser (2008) explains in the form of positional capital in the provision of social relationships and the ability to gain information. Secondly, she receives obligational capital, which is the provision of help, support and camaraderie; including the provision of care, concern and protection of other members of a social network such her friends and family in the Turkish community.

Through the last seven years, Faize has become a single mother and has faced considerable challenges in her life which has caused a sifting of her religious beliefs and cultural identity. She has been able to find comfort and strength in her Islamic beliefs and as a result she has a stronger Islamic identity. Faize appears to be ‘sifting’ through her concepts of cultural and ethnic identity and has confusion about what it really means to
identify as Turkish in her daily life in a multicultural western society. Faize appears to be in the process of negotiating her Turkish identity. It can be seen that through sifting and negotiating aspects of her religious and cultural life, that Faize’s religious identity has strengthened and her cultural identity has weakened.

Shima

After her first interview five years ago, Shima was in the process of rejecting her Islamic identity and expressed the desire to disassociate herself with other Iranians and assimilate into Australian society. She and her husband were postgraduate Iranian students studying in Australia (not funded by Iranian government scholarships), who had grown to reject Islam as a religion and also Shari’a law, citing the system of law as harsh and unjust. At the time of the initial interview, Shima had shown a strong interest in Christianity, having met some Christians at university. She was also distancing herself from the Iranian community, stating that her closest friends were Australians, because she wanted to learn as much about Australia as she could. She commented,

I am not so interested to have Iranian friends here. We want to be familiar with other cultures so I prefer to have Australian friends. I am not so interested in spending my time with Iranian friends. I have got very good Iranian friends back home.

When I met Shima again five years later she had become a Christian who was very devoted to her new religion. She comments,

Religion is now a major part in my life. When I came here I was born a Muslim but I didn’t agree with the things about the Shari’a and set of rules. I found Christianity more reasonable and related to daily life. The Bible makes sense. Arabic was another barrier. I learnt to read the Bible in English and I have a Farsi Bible but prefer my English Bible.

Many of her friends and social events are centred around her Christian faith. However, since her first interview, Shima’s identity as an Iranian woman has become more important to her. She found that she needed to find the good things about her culture and learn more about it. She said that this would not have happened if she had remained in Iran. She comments that she enjoys socializing with Iranians. “We sit and have some tea
and fruit and then play music and dance and talk in our language.” She is also active in the Iranian Association of Queensland (IAQ) and participates in their Iranian human right demonstrations. After the first interview, Shima appeared to be assimilating into Australian society for she was in the process of affirming a new religious identity by embracing the dominant religion of her new country and distancing herself from her homeland culture. Through the last five years Shima has sifted through elements of her religious and cultural identity. As a result she shed her Islamic identity and remade her religious identity by choosing to follow Christianity. After sifting through her Iranian identity, she has recognized the central importance this identity has in her life and negotiated and remade this identity into a stronger cultural identity.

**Conclusion**

Several years after their initial interview, both Faize and Shima have experienced significant changes to their religious and cultural identity. The outworking of the sifting and negotiating process in Faize’s life, as she lives through her current hardships, has caused a strengthening of her religious beliefs and identity. Faize is “living her religion” with more intensity because of loneliness and the absence of a strong Turkish religious community in Brisbane. She is drawing strength through her religious observances, in particular through reading the Qur’an and observing salah. Faize’s religiosity can be seen, as Streib et al (2008:x) indicates, through the context of individuals living their religion in response to their ‘life-worlds’. Faize is still in the process of negotiating her Turkish identity.

For Shima, the concept of lived religion can also be clearly seen in her life. She disagreed strongly about basic tenants of the Islamic religion and decided to change or ‘remake’ her religious identity. In Christianity, Shima has found a religious belief that she views as “more reasonable and related to daily life”. Being able to read the Bible and pray in English or Farsi and not having to use a language she doesn’t understand such as Arabic, has also been of major importance to Shima in living her religion in a meaningful way. This directly relates to McGuire’s point that religious practices need to make sense to the individual (McGuire 2008). Shima had also engaged in the process of sifting and
negotiating through aspects of her Iranian identity and as a result now has a strengthened cultural identity.

Of the remaining seven women who participated in the follow-up interviews, two Iranians experienced change in their religious identity; one Iranian displayed an increase in her religious practice; and three Turkish and one Iranian demonstrated change in their cultural identity. Kalra, Kaur & Hutnyk (2005) describe the ongoing process of hybridity that outplays in migrants lives. This study illustrates the fluid and hybrid nature of migrant women’s cultural and religious identity.

Bibliography


