Transnational conceptions of Islamic community: national and religious subjectivities

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A conversation with a friend in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 2007 evoked how much the idea of globalisation has permeated ideas of legitimacy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Almost sharply, this friend said, ‘Don’t forget, the Prophet imagined Islam as global long before anyone was talking about globalisation.’ If being global has become the currency of neoliberal respect, then scholarship on the multiple and frequently religious ways of claiming cosmopolitanity remains scant. This collection of articles puts transnational conceptions of Islamic community, often referred to as the umma, into conversation with literatures on globalisation and the nation. By attending to the histories, stakes and subjects of claims to national or transnational forms of Islamic identity, we argue that discourses of religious community are constituted by the forms they appear to subvert, particularly the nation-state. This collection showcases case studies from outside Europe, where secular nationalism remains dominant, and from outside the Middle East, where Islam was historically rooted and remains authoritative, potentially decoupling naturalised claims of secularism and nationalism. The study of formerly colonised, globally marginal and/or majority-Muslim contexts suggests that religion, nation and state are not always in dichotomised tension.

The idea of a globalised community of economic and cultural exchange, an image that haunts references to globalisation, is itself an invitation to believe, or an act of faith. Jacques Derrida has called this the fiduciary faith of ‘globalatinisation’ (Derrida 1998: 53), the political project of borderless expansion that is constitutively Christian in its imagination of a sphere of “religion”, from which all other secular political projects are supposed to separate themselves, while at the same time covertly underpinning them. The imagination involved in the very discourse of globalisation requires envisioning a globe in which national borders enforced by states no longer hold the power they once did. Similarly, appeals to alternative, yet equally global, communities, such as apparently universal religious communities, rest on parallel foundations. However, as scholars of globalisation have argued, no terrain is free of political histories of inequality and imperial exclusions (Appadurai 1996). For many Muslims round the world, an idealised image of
an Islamic community that transcends national borders rests on the appealing possibility of overcoming precisely those colonial histories that have marginalised the religion and its followers. Yet, as is clear in some of the articles that follow, in making claims about an “Islamic world” some adherents of the religion reproduce exclusionary practices, positioning particular places as peripheral to the true, authentic, originating authority of a single religion.

The nation, whose legitimacy often derives from and is contained by the secular state, became a basic and mediating unit of international and local communities in political and academic projects during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During key moments in those centuries, translocal Islamic communities have been considered threats to the more modern and progressive unit of the secular nation. In this sense, the idea of an Islamic religious community and the nation have been seen to be at odds by those invested in Western conceptions of the nation as secular. Rather than accepting Islam as singular, parochial or global, these articles instead build on the histories that have made the idea of transnational Islamic community both appealing and threatening. From diverse disciplinary perspectives, we argue for attention to the parallels between political, semiotic and economic forms of globalisation and the global dreams that often undergird religious community. This approach builds on at least three literatures: the historical foundations of Islamic community (Ho 2006; Laffan 2003; Tagliacozzo 2009), the growing scholarship on the global appeal of Christianity (Cannell 2006; Keane 2007; Rutherford 2003) and work on the changing conceptions of Islamic community (Deeb 2006; Mandaville 2001; Roy 2006). Each of these literatures has benefited from Talal Asad’s (2003) reminder that the opposition of Christianity and Islam is produced out of a dynamic, discursive distinction between a religious private sphere and a secular public sphere. In showing that the nation demands its own exclusions, such as the idea of Islam as singular, pre-or anti-national and out of step with modern times, Asad has insisted on extending to Islamic traditions the same diversity and tensions that have been granted to other religions that are produced by the demands of modern secularism.

Examining the anxieties and comforts that universalising religious communities generate requires naming the unit that religious identities appear to subvert or supercede: the secular state as nation and its foundation in empire. Not so different from the now-questionable, zero-sum, perspective on globalisation and its assumption that transnational economic and political ties inherently weaken the role of the nation-state, so too has the nation been at the centre of debates about forms of religious community, especially when the religion in question is Islam. The contrast of religion and nation, primaeval and modern, transnational and national, has returned in new ways and with new provocations. The naturalisation of this contrast is a political project, but one that has endured in spite of considerable historical and geographical variation. An especially political aspect of this dichotomisation rests on the way in which representations of a globalised Islamic community are rendered
ahistorical, exemplified in the concept of the umma (and its related imagined community, the caliphate). The word umma, derivative from its root umm (mother), was the Arabic term that came to designate “Islamic community”. While historically the term umma has taken on multiple religious, political and affective resonances, today it signifies primarily a pan-Islamic, transnational community of adherents to Islam.

The allure or threat of a universal, transcendent religious identity as a way of claiming a space within the secular nation-state only makes sense within these particular histories. Depending on the observer, the power of the umma across nation-states is an inspiring call to a glorious past or a threatening throwback to primordial traditions. The imagined existence of “global Islam”, a monolithic community united in its opposition to the west and threatening because of its transnational appeal, has been central to the diplomatic and military agendas of the USA and many European states. Critical scholarship on the appeal of the umma frequently relies on and reproduces conceptions of the umma and Muslims as constitutive of particular localised traditions, while their discursive claims to a global Islamic identity are marked as expressions of timeless religious community or over-reaching to achieve a new global order.

Therefore, our point of departure is that globalised networks of power reference a collection of capitalist, competing nation-states whose individual claims to sovereignty may be equal but who are highly unequal in power and thus vulnerable in different ways. We argue that, despite the present harnessing of empire to the globalisation of productive networks, this does not mark the decline of the nation-state, even though it might complicate and reconfigure its boundaries and the relationship it has to its subjects. Rather than opposing the global and the national, and the religious and the national, it is clear in this collection that the apparently natural dichotomy of these categories is discursive and political. They require work to maintain, yet circulate as natural contrasts. The scholarship that follows shows that these categories work in relationship one to the other to produce and reinforce master narratives of nationhood that seek to consolidate the nation-state in producing secular and other subjectivities. More interesting, then, is how or why the nation continues to function as the conceptual vessel that both incorporates and is transformed by imperialist and anti-imperialist identifications, and differing communal, political, economic and national imaginaries.

By focusing on the different grains, layers, asymmetries, disjunctions and differences in national narratives that particular populations produce – be they transnational, hybridised, diasporic or respectable middle-class citizens – we reveal how the idea of the nation is often reproduced powerfully through precisely the forms that appear to threaten it.

The articles that follow do not presume the nation is a pre-existing social or political category, but rather seek to understand how it is made and naturalised in constitution with forms that cite or rely on the vessel of the nation in order to summon membership in a community that appears to
supercede it. By addressing this question across temporal and geographically diverse settings, and from an explicitly interdisciplinary approach, we find that the ideas of community and nation are bound up with often invisible but powerful claims on secularism, race, ethnicity, ethics and morality. The specific modes, goals and challenges of imagining a pure space of “Islam” outside the politics of national inclusion or exclusion are apparent in the articles by Peter Mandaville and Nabil Echchaibi. Mandaville’s research on new forms of Islamic civil society expands arguments by Olivier Roy to show that even as Islamic solidarity and justice movements such as Turkish Fethullah Gülen focus on the umma as a site for uplift and improvement, these appeals nonetheless rely on concepts of neoliberal governmentality that are in an intermediate relationship to the nation-state, in between the institutional framework of the modern polity and claims to discursive orthodoxies of an imagined traditional Islam. Attending to the mediation and circulation of transnational forms of community and authority, Echchaibi argues that religious authority is shifting from the control of a diverse universe of charismatic ulama based in the Middle East to a new mix of mediated forms, from glossy television shows featuring celebrity da’iats whose broadcasts are beamed to many parts of the Muslim world, to lower-tech but equally charismatic and globally watched autodidacts who rely on YouTube. Both Mandaville and Echchaibi point out the institutional interests invested in these new communities of belonging that appear to transcend the nation.

Other articles in the collection ask more pointedly how apparently post-national forms and rituals reinvoke the concept of national community, even as they seem to disavow it. Dennis McGilvray’s article traces the conundrums faced by the Sri Lankan Sunni Muslim minority, a context riven by three decades of civil war that attempted to determine ethnic and religious categories. Neither Buddhist nor Hindu (the two majorities and sides in the war), Sri Lankan Muslims have, in the past decade, rekindled historical ties outside the country in ways that have also generated anxieties about Islamist politics within Sri Lanka. As a result, Sufi sheiks have come under additional scrutiny and surveillance. Paul Silverstein’s analysis of a minority ritual in south-eastern Morocco calls for recognising the multiple intentions and audiences embedded in performances of communal belonging. Through masquerades nostalgic for a former Jewish presence, Berber (Amazigh) activists simultaneously summon audiences at local, national and transnational scales. At the national scale, these performances risk the ire of Islamist reformists, but Amazigh activists nonetheless consider the masquerades declarations on an imagined transnational scale, consciously channelling a cosmopolitan past as a way of countering current stereotypes of Muslims as anti-Semitic.

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