SWAP: Sharing Work on Appalachia in Progress:

James S. Brown Graduate Student Award for Research on Appalachia

Project Title**:**

**Reconstituting Religious Identity: Multivocal Religiosity in the Appalachian Muslim community**

Erfan Saidi Moqadam

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My project has documented multiple expressions of religiosity among members of the Muslim community in the Kentucky portion of the Appalachian region of the United States. This research is part of my broader research that focuses on the community in two large cities of Kentucky, what I consider to be the Bluegrass Muslim community, comparing with the community in smaller cities of Appalachian Kentucky. The main objective of my research is to understand the ways in which members of the Muslim community negotiate and reconstruct their religious identity in a context that is at once relatively secular, compared to the country of origin, but also part of the American “Bible belt.”

The hypothesis this project was designed to test is whether members of the community, are reacting to the univocal, theocratic state of their country of origin by pursuing forms of multifaceted and hybrid religiosity.Moreover, interaction between the Muslim identity and Islamophobic political rhetoric contributes to re-conceptualizations of religious identity among this community.

Kentucky is an ideal setting for this project in part because members of the Appalachian Muslim diaspora have encountered an American sub-culture influenced by scots-Irish heritage (Woodard 2011) and that, despite being a part of relatively “secular” United States culture, is a part of the “Bible Belt” (Boles 1996, Locke 2017, Heyrman 1988). Members of the community are often seen as fitting into a smaller category known to Americans, that of “Muslim” or “Middle Eastern.”

My interlocutors pointed out that the Appalachian population tends to be unfamiliar, and often inhospitable, to those characterized as “Muslim” or “Middle Eastern,” exhibiting knowledge that may have been informed by stereotypes, political rhetoric in the media, and common-sense perceptions in the public sphere (Hafez 2000, Karim 2003, Poole 2002). Employing an anthropological lens enabled me to evaluate the process of identity reconstruction from diverse perspectives across the community that are considered by the public sphere and media, and also themselves, as a general or universal Muslim identity, experienced everywhere in the same way. However, my ethnographic account of the Bluegrass and Appalachian Muslim community reveal the ways in which their identities have been reconstructed and meanings are being made differently around the concept of Islam in their lived experiences.

Calling into question theories of anthropology of Islam that conceive of Muslims’ practices as reflecting a homogeneous universal identity, I focus on the varying ontological expressions through which people identify themselves as Muslim. This spectrum may range from a devout Muslim to the one who only practice Islamic rituals, such as funeral ceremonies, on occasion.

I approached the process of the re-conceptualization of the Muslim religiosity as a sphere in which a variety of religious meanings, experimentations, interpretations, and ontologies come together in ways that do not necessarily constitute a coalesced or cogent whole of Muslim religious identity. My intention was to observe the dialogic nature of the social interaction of a community with heterogeneous religiosity and examine the way its members reconstruct their Muslim identity in response to the absence of the theocratic state’s dominant and univocal doctrine, as well as the stereotypes against Muslim in the host county. My ethnographic accounts have provided me, with a unique opportunity in which a variety of perspectives mutually complemented each other. My participant observations and interviews revealed that how manifestations of multilayered Islamic identities exist side by side in a community, or even situationally within the same person. My ethnography explored that each of these identities could shape and reshape their modalities in interacting with one another and ideas such nationhood, ethnicity, religious identity, tradition, and culture are complicatedly intertwined so that embodying fixed identity cause a problematic situation.

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