New Ethnographies

Iraqi women in Denmark

Ritual performance and belonging in everyday life

MARIANNE HOLM PEDERSEN

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TURKEY
Zakho
Mosul
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IRAN
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Kirkuk
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Samarra
Rutba
Baghdad
Tigris
JORDAN
Karbala
Najaf
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Kuwait
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Map of Iraq

Map of Denmark

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Introduction

Challenges of belonging

In Denmark, the year consists of sixteen months: November to October, and then November, November, November, November. These words belong to a famous Danish poet and they came into my mind one cold, rainy and dark November afternoon when I was walking towards a communal hall in a housing complex in Nørrebro, a district in Copenhagen. However, when I entered the room where Iraqi Shi'ite women were about to hold a mourning ceremony, I left November with my wet clothes and shoes at the entrance. The windows were covered by curtains and inside there was an excited atmosphere as the approximately sixty women and children seated themselves on the many carpets that had been spread out on the floor for the event.

The mourning ceremony was held in honour of the death of Imam Ali, one of the most important historical figures in Shi'a Islam. The main part of the ritual consisted of lamentations for the deceased Imam. Umm Hussein,[1] a short, round, very charismatic woman, was in charge of the performance. She was known as one of the best Iraqi reciters in Copenhagen and this performance left no doubt that she deserved her title. Umm Hussein began by speaking about the Imam and the lessons to be learned from his life, but slowly she shifted from speech into a recitation of poems of sorrow. Her tone turned into a wailing sound, she raised her voice and she stood up in order to use the power of her lungs better. With her move the intensity of the ritual increased and women started weeping and crying. Shortly afterwards they got up and began to strike themselves symbolically in different rites of lamentation.

To an outside observer the event appeared rather exotic. The women dressed in their black *abayas*,[2] as well as the weeping, recitation and rites of lamentation, gave the impression of migrants performing rituals from their homeland, keeping alive traditional norms and practices and emphasising their sense of attachment to their places of origin. It also fitted well into Danish public discourses that see Muslim women as culturally oppressed 'others' who are isolated but also refuse to become part of Danish society. In sum, the event seemed to epitomise all the ways in which Iraqi women did not belong in Denmark.

However, from the women's point of view the mourning ceremony was embedded in the local context. The public performance of Shi'ite rites of mourning was

prohibited in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, and therefore many of the women present had not participated in collective rites of mourning before they came to Denmark. The women performed religious rituals at the commemoration and similar events, but the meanings of these practices were reinterpreted in the contexts of exile and of the very active Shi'ite milieu in Copenhagen. Contrary to received wisdom about ethnic groups, the sense of community among the women was not just based on their shared origins in Iraq. Rather, the religious milieu became a place where women of very different backgrounds could create a local network that acquired importance in their everyday lives in Copenhagen. In other words, while the ritual performances may symbolise women's difference from Danish society, at the same time they were part of women's localisation and construction of belonging to the place where they lived.

This example illustrates that belonging is a two-sided phenomenon. The Iraqi women have lived in Denmark for one or two decades and no longer see themselves as outsiders, but in the perceptions of the majority society they are associated with their places of origin. This contradiction rests on the fact that belonging can be constructed and negotiated on many different levels. While women's forms of belonging were mainly created on the level of social interaction in relation to their lives in a particular city, Copenhagen, public debate in Denmark focuses on the abstract level of collective identity. Even though refugees and immigrants make up only 8 per cent of Denmark's 5.5 million inhabitants, since the 1990s both public debate and public policies have been very much concerned with the negative consequences of immigration and the challenges of integration. The debate frequently concerns the distribution of rights and obligations among citizens and residents of the Danish welfare state, but it also revolves around norms, values and cultural difference. This 'cultural anxiety' (Grillo 2003) especially concerns how Muslim immigrants observe Islam and whether this is compatible with 'Danish' culture and notions of 'Danishness'. Despite the fact that there are many lines of differentiation within Danish society, Islam and Muslims have come to epitomise cultural difference (cf. Gullestad 2002a: 59; 2002b; Stolcke 1995). Hence, the Iraqi women were constructing belonging to a place in which others did not expect them to belong.

The main purpose of this book is to explore the construction of belonging in ritual performance and everyday life. More specifically, I investigate how Iraqi Shi'a Muslim women in Copenhagen construct a sense of belonging to the place where they live through ritual performances. I also examine how this process is interrelated with their experiences of inclusion in and exclusion from Danish society. I suggest that, instead of looking at Iraqi women's sense of belonging to Danish society as such, it is necessary to explore the social relations and processes of place-making that are part of their daily lives and religious activities. This is based on the claim that migrants' attachments to places are closely tied to the social relations they maintain there and the kinds of practices they can perform (cf. Olwig 2005). As my primary example of social practice I focus on the performance and organisation of calendrical and life-cycle rituals. Although ritual events are in some ways distinguished from ordinary everyday practices, their

performance is deeply rooted in the social relations and structures of everyday life (Mitchell 1956; Sjørslev 2007a). This means that they are affected by changes in the social context in which they take place and that they can tell us something about social relations more broadly. I therefore use ritual events as a cultural prism (Löfgren 1993) to expose notions of relatedness (Carsten 2000) and relations to place that are not always apparent or explicated in daily life. The three rituals presented in the book – 'Id al-fitr, Muharram and *taklif* – have been chosen because they shed light on the social and cultural dynamics in three different, yet interrelated domains of women's lives: the extended family, the ethno-religious milieu and the domain of generational relations.

By focusing on the interrelations between belonging, practice and social context in the case of Shi'a Muslim Iraqi women, the book contributes to filling a *lacuna* in the existing literature on immigration to Europe. An increasing number of studies within fields such as anthropology, sociology and political science have examined the ways in which Muslims perform Islam in the host society and even how a 'European Islam' might take shape (e.g. Bowen 2010; Mandaville 2001; Ramadan 2004; Roy 2004). Of particular interest seems to be whether Muslim beliefs and practices are being transformed due to the new European context and whether Muslim religiosity is becoming more individualised (for an overview, see Peter 2006). These studies thus contribute to a more general discussion of how migration affects the ways in which migrants perform and interpret religious practice (see e.g. Levitt 2001; Schiffauer 1990; Vertovec 2004). However, in the decade since 2001 the overarching majority of studies of Muslims and Islam in Europe have dealt with topics related to the aftermath of the terror attacks on 11 September 2001. Even when they do not, they tend to focus on the public and political dimensions of religious involvement. This means that they primarily look at the representatives of the Muslim groups and their associational activities, or that they investigate more politicised issues. There are critical reasons for focusing on all of these topics, but there is also a tremendous need for studies dealing with the cultural and religious expressions of ordinary people who are not organised in any particular way. The question of how religious involvement affects migrants' sense of belonging to the place where they live remains fairly unexamined. This lack of knowledge raises important ethnographic questions. For instance, how do factors such as gender, ethnicity or social class intersect and affect religious performance in different local settings? In her study of Moroccan women in Italy, Ruba Salih (2003) shows how women's local and transnational practices and identifications were framed in both gendered and class ways by the structural constraints in the host society. Likewise, most studies focus on the majority of Sunni Muslims, yet Shi'a Muslim migrants constitute a double minority in the sense that they belong to an ethnic minority in their country of residence and a religious minority among Muslims. In what ways do these identities then play together in their understandings of who they are and where they belong? Finally, how do the ritual performances of the so-called first generation of migrants become affected by the new social context? Within studies of both migration and Muslims in Europe there is a trend towards examining the lives and complex identifications of the young

people who are growing up in Europe: conversely, the parental generation has received only a little attention from researchers. One may ask whether this relative lack of attention is based on subconscious assumptions about their traditional ways of acting and the fact that young people, who are more likely to be bilingual, are much more accessible (Gardner 2002a: 13). The bias towards the second generation not only leaves out important perspectives on the experience of mobility, it also contains the risk of assuming that cultural change and migrants' adaptation to a new locality takes place linearly across generations (Gardner 2002a: 13). Yet, in her early studies of Pakistani migrants, Pnina Werbner showed how migrants' performance of ritual events may be seen as attempts to ritualise relations with new people and places (1990; see also Werbner 1996). Ritual performance does not necessarily symbolise relations to one's place of origin: it may also be a means of creating social relations and belonging in the place where one is currently living.

A different gap in the literature concerns analytical approaches towards the issue of belonging. The criticism raised against previous approaches in anthropology which studied local culture independently of the broader global context has led to a focus on de-localised and more symbolic forms of community and belonging. This implies that studies tend to treat the notion of belonging in the abstract, focusing on different ethnic, diasporic or religious collectivities (see e.g. Appadurai 1996; Brah 1996; Werbner 2002a). Notions of community and belonging thereby become removed from the actual social relations through which they are constructed (Amit 2002a; 2002b; see also Olwig 2002a). In addition, notions of identity and belonging within diasporas are frequently examined solely in relation to the homeland (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 598). The predominant focus on national identity and migrants' relations with their places of origin somewhat obscures the fact that, for many migrants, lived reality is primarily local (Mahler 1998: 80; see also Smith and Guarnizo 1998).

All in all, the trends in different fields of research towards investigating topics such as diasporic identity, public religion and the maintenance of transnational relations come together and create what Renato Rosaldo has called 'zones of cultural invisibility' (1988: 79). Consequently, local practices and social relations in migrants' everyday lives tend to be neglected. For example, Iraqi women run households, bring their children to the day-care centre and school, buy the groceries, communicate with their extended families, stop at the library on the way home and attend a number of social and religious events. Studies of migration that only focus on how belonging is constructed in relation to more abstract collectivities, and not in relation to local context, are therefore inadequate. Certainly this does not imply that local life can be understood independently of its incorporation into broader political, economic or cultural structures, but it is nonetheless necessary to examine the ways in which migrants' sense of place and their experience of living 'particular lives in particular places' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 25) affect their notions of belonging.

In this book I therefore prioritise a local perspective on transnational migration. Based on a thorough ethnographic account of Iraqi women's ritual

performances and everyday lives, the book shows that religious rituals and community-making among Iraqi migrants are not in contradiction with the demands of life in Copenhagen. In sharp contrast to the fact that women's religious activities contribute in many ways to their being categorised as outsiders to Danish society, their participation in ritual events also localises them in the city. It might even be argued that their involvement in the religious milieu allows them to subvert their low status in Danish society. In this way, the findings of the book refute the all too simplistic assumptions of the more general debate on Islam and immigration in Europe.

Studying Iraqi migration

The book is based on fifteen months of fieldwork among Iraqi women and their families in Copenhagen, carried out between November 2003 and July 2005. Despite the salience of Iraq's situation in international politics, migration from Iraq has not been granted much attention in the academic literature.[3] However, international migration from Iraq has always been linked to the political situation in the country, and a brief overview is necessary to understand the situation of Iraqi women in Denmark. Iraq became a republic following a military coup against the monarchy in 1958. The subsequent period saw a number of coups d'état, until the Ba'th party seized power in 1968. Although Saddam Hussein was already a dominant figure within the Ba'th party during this period, he did not formally gain the presidency until 1979. Under his regime, Iraq became increasingly marked by the effects of wars, persecution and international sanctions (see Tripp 2005). The war between Iraq and Iran lasted from 1980 to 1988, and the first Gulf War took place after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. As a consequence of the Kuwait war, United Nations' sanctions were imposed and remained in place between 1990 and 2003, being the most comprehensive sanctions system ever imposed on any country (Al-Ali 2007: 54). The sanctions were meant to target the regime, but in reality it was the population that suffered, as basic infrastructure deteriorated, poverty increased and the social and cultural fabric of society changed (Alnasrawi 2003; Al-Ali 2003).[4] Simultaneously, Saddam Hussein and his network continued the random persecution, imprisonment and killing of individuals who, in one way or another, were seen as disagreeing with the regime.[5] There is probably not one extended family within Iraq that has not experienced the consequences of oppression or suffered the loss of one or more relatives either in war or through imprisonment. Whereas the number of Iraqis living abroad prior to 1990 has been estimated at approximately 1 million people, by 2002 probably another 1.5 million Iraqis had left Iraq to settle elsewhere (Chatelard n.d.: 8).[6]

Political developments in Iraq make the case of Iraqi migration particularly apt for a study of belonging. When Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled by the invasion of American forces and their allies in March 2003, it was greeted by excitement and initial optimism among the majority of Shi'ite Iraqis in Denmark and abroad. In combination with the introduction of internet communication,

the possibility to travel to Iraq and to speak freely by telephone offered the opportunity to engage in transnational relations to an extent that had not previously been possible. Although there had been some contact with Iraq, the new situation changed transnational interaction and, not least, sparked interest in the possibility of return. Since then Iraq has unfortunately experienced several years of political turmoil and violent conflicts, and the majority of Iraqis in Denmark chose not to go back.[7] Yet, my fieldwork took place at a unique point in time when Iraqi families in Copenhagen were in the midst of both practical and emotional considerations about where to spend their futures. This highlighted the issues of place, practice and belonging that will be treated in this book.

The majority of Iraqi refugees in Denmark arrived between the end of the 1980s and the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. By January 2012, 29,884 Iraqis and their descendants were living in Denmark (www.danmarksstatistik.dk).[8] Contrary to their settlement in countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, Iraqis in Denmark have only been able to enter the country through Danish asylum policies. The vast majority of Iraqi residents in Denmark have received political asylum on the basis of their experiences of persecution, imprisonment and torture, or else have been granted family reunification with a relative already in the country. Whatever the motivations for their flight, almost all Iraqis arriving in the years 1994–2001 were granted asylum, since their escape in itself would have been a potential cause for further persecution upon their return to Iraq. In this period Denmark had an acceptance rate of approximately 90 per cent for Iraqi asylum-seekers (Udlændingestyrelsen 2005: 12). This asylum policy was changed with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 in which Denmark participated. It was argued that Iraqis were no longer in need of protection, and during the early 2000s Denmark accepted the claims of fewer than 10 per cent of Iraqi asylum-seekers. However, the Danish state acknowledged that it had a certain responsibility towards Iraqis who had worked with the Danish military forces in Iraq, and in 2007 and 2008 a number of Iraqi interpreters and other assistants were granted asylum on the basis of their previous involvement with the Danish military. The impact of living under a dictatorship is apparent in the high number of Iraqis in Denmark who suffer from ill health and psychological trauma, and Iraqi nationals greatly outnumber other refugee nationalities at the rehabilitation centres for traumatised refugees in Denmark (Danneskiold-Samsøe 2006: 22).

It is not the aim of this book to give a representative account of the lives of Iraqi refugees in Denmark. Indeed, such a generalisation based on national identity would not be possible because there are many lines of division among Iraqi refugees in Denmark. In terms of ethnic identity the majority are Arab Shi'a Muslims or Kurds, but Sunni Muslims, Turkmen and Assyrian Christians have also settled in Denmark, reflecting the diversity of the population in Iraq. Yet, lines of division do not necessarily run along ethnic boundaries. The divisions between Sunni and Shi'a in Iraq to which the media so frequently refer should not be taken as self-evident. I found that differences existed rather between observant Muslims and those who did not adhere to Islam, or else they were related to other social differences that were predominant in Iraq. Place of residence, urban or rural

background, social class, professional background, political orientation and generation are all modes of differentiation that played a role in Iraq (Al-Ali 2007: 2) and which continue to be important among and within Iraqi communities in Copenhagen. Different waves of refugees have also to some extent consisted of different groups of people. In sum, although the background of Iraqi refugees in the Iraqi nation state creates a framework in which their current negotiations of practice and belonging may be understood, it does not define an *a priori* community that is simply there to be studied. The analysis to be carried out in the following chapters will draw equally on other local, national and transnational identifications in the context of Iraqi women's negotiations of belonging.

Against this background, I have sought to gain a thorough understanding of the lives of a smaller group of people, rather than a more general insight into the lives of 'Iraqis' in Denmark. The women whose stories I present share an urban, Arab background. They were born between 1950 and 1974 and they grew up in Baghdad or in other Iraqi cities such as Karbala and Najaf. Having arrived in Denmark between 1988 and 1997, at the time of my fieldwork they had been living there for between seven and seventeen years.[9] The book thus focuses on the long-term settlement of the so-called first generation of immigrants and the issues of belonging that are relevant to them. All the Iraqi women had a Muslim background, but their ways of observing Islam covered a wide spectrum. For some Islam was a major part of their lives, while for others it was less so. Finally, a few of my interlocutors were not observant Muslims at all. However, the majority were Shi'a Muslims who actively participated in Shi'ite religious activities in Copenhagen. It is their experiences that make up the main focus of the book. Instead of focusing more broadly on Shi'a Islam as a belief system, I concentrate on the social significance and implications of rituals. In one instance, I analyse the performance of a calendrical rite and the forms of belonging created in the ritual itself, but otherwise my main interest in this book is the social interactions that take place *around* the ritual event. I focus on the social organisation of the rituals, their (re)production and the ways in which they are embedded in the wider contexts of everyday life. The popular ritual calendar in Shi'a Islam contains more than thirty events that Shi'ites may choose to celebrate annually. In Copenhagen, this sets a framework in relation to which Iraqi women arrange a number of activities in communal halls, rented mosques and sometimes in their homes. The organising of religious events did not take place within a formal association, but generally occurred when individuals or groups of women decided to arrange religious gatherings. These gatherings were, of course, religiously significant, but they also became social arenas where women could create a network and meet to exchange news from Iraq, relate everyday troubles, laugh and share food together. Sociability was an important motivation for women's participation. In this way, religious life in Copenhagen serves as a context in which Iraqi women perform many different practices and negotiate a range of identifications and levels of belonging.

These women's religious engagement is also related to their social and gendered positions in Danish society. An important theme throughout the book is