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Truth in Progress: Second-Generation Ahmadi-Muslim Women Performing Integration in Germany

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Introduction

Since the 11 September terror attacks of 2001, there has been an explosion of academic and media debate around political Islam and factors motivating jihadist extremism. As conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere bring waves of Muslim asylum seekers to Europe, these debates have become localised as attention turns to Muslim communities in the West. This has been especially true of Germany, which received the largest number of asylum applications globally in 2016, with the bulk of applicants coming from Muslim majority countries Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.[1] With the percentage of immigrants and Germans with a *Migrationshintergrund* (migration background) steadily increasing[2], cultural and economic anxieties connected to immigration have prompted backlash against generous asylum policies and increased support for the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party (Hambauer & Mays 2018: 150).

Against this political backdrop, much of subsequent migration scholarship has retained, if implicitly, the preoccupation with Muslims' successful cultural and civic integration into the secular mainstream and the omnipresent threat of Islamist extremism lingering in the background. Research in the social sciences, particularly in sociology and related fields, have focused on factors driving Muslim religiosity (Voas & Fleischmann 2012; Bozorgmehr & Ketcham 2018), affecting national identification (Leszczensky, Maxwell & Bleich 2019; Fleischmann & Phalet 2016: 456), or connecting discrimination and feelings of alienation from the national community (Holtz, Dahinden & Wagner 2013). However, much less ink has been spent in examining how national civic identities and belongings develop, not despite adherence to the Muslim faith, but because of it.

What an underlying focus on the threat of political Islam and jihadism misses are the myriad other ways pious and civic identities can (in)form each other to produce subjects that are both devoutly Muslim and political, though not fundamentalist. Such subjects have no interest in implementing sharia law, yet still seek to shape themselves and their wider national political communities according to Islamic values. A better understanding of how and why these subjects form and articulate certain claims to truth can help bring new depth to established categories of religion and citizenship, which tend to be treated as static and monolithic in integration scholarship. This paper will do so through a case study of the Ahmadiyya, a small Muslim reformist group with South Asian origins, focusing specifically on the organisation's German branch, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Deutschland (AMJD).

After sketching some historical background, I will establish the importance of the concept of truth for the community and explain why making truth claims audible in the German civil-social landscape (representation) is an important part of members' pious practice. Specifically, I focus on the Ahmadi claim to be the one "true" Islam against accusations that they are not "real" or "proper" Muslims.[3] I show how, by emphasising members' exemplary integration status, the Jamaat is able to position itself as uniquely representative of European social and democratic values, gaining positive visibility and credibility while bolstering claims to proper Muslimness. Second-generation Ahmadi-German women in particular, I argue, play an important role in acting as the public face of their religious community.[4] I trace daily acts of representation that shape both women themselves and the wider society around them according to Muslim and German values, which they understand to be inextricably intertwined. The last part of my argument will analyse one particular civil society intervention to demonstrate how additional claims emerge regarding what it means to be a true German, posing a relevant critique to existing categories of cultural citizenship.

The Ahmadiyya in Germany

The Ahmadiyya movement was founded in the Punjabi city of Qadian in 1888 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a Quranic scholar (Valentine 2008: 51). Characteristically Sufi in many ways, it was one of many reformist sects emerging in an era of unprecedented global exchange, when existing power structures and modes of religious authority were being undermined by British colonial presence (Khan 2015: 4-5). Ghulam Ahmad's universalising message sought to revitalise Islam from a state of decline and unite India's Muslim community against the external threats of Christian missionarism and competing Hindu reformist groups on the one hand (Reetz 2006: 85), and European materialism and atheism on the other (ibid.: 141). In doing so, Ghulam Ahmad claimed the status of *mahdi* (divinely guided one), *mujaddid* (reformer of the faith), promised messiah, and, ultimately, prophet (Valentine 2014: 101). It is the latter claim that would provoke the ire of other Muslims, who felt that Ghulam Ahmad's claims challenge *khataman nabiyeen* (Prophet Muhammad's status as final prophet) (ibid.: 102).

Despite these theological differences, the Ahmadiyya supported the creation of Pakistan and shifted their community base across the newly created border during the Partition of British India (Ispahani 2018: 51). Ahmadi leaders were prominent in the early Pakistani bureaucracy; among their number was Sir Muhammad Zafarullah Khan, the first minister of foreign affairs (ibid.: 51). However, almost immediately after the birth of the new state, Deobandi clerics escalated their inflammatory rhetoric against the Ahmadiyya and their "heretical" beliefs (ibid.: 51). In 1953, a wave of anti-Ahmadi riots swept the Pakistani Punjab, leaving over two thousand Ahmadis dead (ibid.: 53).

This would prove to be just the beginning; anti-Ahmadi agitation continued sporadically in the following decades, culminating in a 1974 constitutional amendment declaring the community legally non-Muslim (ibid.: 97). By relegating Ahmadis to the status of second-class citizens, the state asserted its right to unilaterally manage citizenship on the basis of religion and attempted to define Pakistani identity in opposition to an internal religious "other" (Iqtidar 2012). In the decades that followed, additional discriminatory laws were passed; Ahmadis were barred from certain positions in the military and civil services, forbidden from using Islamic nomenclature, and required to denounce their beliefs in order to apply for a passport or national identity card (Ispahani 2018: 99). As the civil rights situation has deteriorated, vigilante violence against the community has escalated unchecked (ibid.:168, 175, 184). The Ahmadi organisational leadership eventually fled to London, and the 1980s saw a mass exodus of community members from Pakistan to Europe and North America. These asylum-seekers would become the core of the Ahmadi-German community today.

The Ahmadiyya are particularly interesting in the German context due to the visibility and controversy they engender. Though at 30,000, the number of Ahmadi Muslims in Germany is relatively small[5], the community's presence has long roots, with Ahmadi missionaries establishing their first post in Berlin as early as 1922 (Backhausen 2008: 54). Through active public relations work, the group's wide public reach belies its limited numbers. The Ahmadiyya have also been active in seeking institutional recognition of Islam. In 2013, the AMJD gained legal recognition under the *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* (statutory body governing religious organisations) in the state of Hessen, making it the first Islamic organisation elevated to level of the Christian church nationwide.[6] With increased visibility, the community has also become the center of controversy as plans to build mosques in Berlin and elsewhere were met with local push-back (Nijhawan 2010: 439).

Despite their significance in shaping public perception and discourses of Islam in Pakistan and Germany, ethnographic studies on the Ahmadiyya are few and far between. There are a handful of historical accounts that cover the transnational community's basic beliefs, practices, and history (Lavan 1974; Friedmann 1989; Valentine 2008; Khan 2015), missionary activities (Turner 1988; Jonker 2016; Hanson 2017), and historical-political significance in the Pakistani context (Iqtidar 2012; Qasmi 2014; Saeed 2016). These works aside, much of the existing literature is either produced by the Ahmadi organisation itself with an eye to proselytisation or by a small cadre of openly hostile scholars who uncritically parrot the community's many aggressive adversaries, a problem noted by others who have written on the subject (Nijhawan 2010: 444; Beyeler 2012: 662; Khan 2015: 10).

The result is a body of scholarship which tends to cast the Ahmadiyya in a very negative or positive light depending on the authors' ideological motivations, failing to adequately treat complexities in doctrine and practice (Lathan 2008: 374). In sidestepping this problematic binary, my study fleshes out existing knowledge of Ahmadis in the diaspora, which has primarily relied on the accounts of men (Valentine 2008), first generation women (Beyeler 2012; Ahmed-Ghosh 2004, 2006), and official Jamaat resources (Drover 2015).[7] In doing so, I seek to enrich the literature on the diasporic experience of Muslims as a whole, from which the Ahmadiyya are largely absent.

Truth and truth claims

In light of the movement's fraught history, it is clear why the concept of truth has particular salience for Ahmadis in the global diaspora. Similar to other revivalist groups, the community considers itself to represent "true" Islam despite adversaries' depiction of them as "fake" Muslims (Valentine 2014: 100). Experiences of religious persecution in Pakistan and elsewhere only increase believers' conviction that they have been chosen for these tribulations by virtue of the truth of their community's message (Nijhawan 2016: 257). Indeed, the semi-regular bombings and extrajudicial killings of Ahmadi friends and relatives back in Pakistan give diasporic Ahmadis a very real sense of the stakes involved in differing conceptions of truth and a sense of urgency to vocalise their truth in an environment in which it is relatively safe to do so.

Whereas other Muslim communities in Germany tend to be relative newcomers lacking outreach institutions and cultural capital[8], the AMJD has a well-funded, highly-organised media apparatus, including a German language television channel that has been active since 1996 (see Kandel, 2006, p.294). And while the Ahmadis are widely considered heretics in Pakistan, there is little awareness of intra-Islamic theological disputes in Germany, meaning the community's claims to be Muslim go largely unchallenged.[9] Following Schaflechner, I will call these assertions to represent the "real" or "authentic" Islam "truth claims" and attempt to trace the ways in which truth claims are performatively established and shape reality through their representations (Schaflechner 2018: 19).[10]

It is important to note that for Ahmadis, representing the one "true" Islam to those outside the community is as much a moral project as it is a political or social intervention. First, it helps believers adhere more closely to Islamic doctrine, thus forming themselves into more perfectly devout subjects.[11] Second, it raises the visibility of their doctrine vis-à-vis the wider German public—an important religious practice for a proselytising sect that relies heavily on converts for growth (Reetz 2006: 159). Finally, making claims about their community's inherent belonging in German society helps performatively shape that society into one in which Ahmadi-Muslims, and by extension, Ahmadi-Islam can thrive.

Why second-generation women?

Women play a unique role in acting as the face of their religious community to the general public for several reasons. First, they are distinctly marked as Muslim in the public space through the wearing of the headscarf. It is important to note that this makes Ahmadi-German women identifiable as members of the Muslim faith in a general sense, but not as members of the Ahmadi community specifically. As we will see, this ambiguity enables women to speak on behalf of Islam from the margins of Islam.

Secondly, there is a high level of awareness within the community that Islam's alleged oppression of women—and specifically, the headscarf as a tool of that oppression—is a source of anti-Muslim anxiety in Germany. The foregrounding of the "woman question" in the Jamaat's public relations efforts demonstrates awareness of these anxieties and a keen desire to address them directly. I frequently observed "the role of women in Islam" highlighted alongside more central themes such as the Holy Quran, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and the founding history of the Ahmadiyya Movement at public Ahmadi events. The AMJD website also includes a prominent page devoted to "The Woman in Islam", as well as multiple subpages emphasising women's rights, spiritual equality, female education, and denouncing "cultural" practices such as forced marriage—apparently with an eye to refuting claims of Muslim women's oppression (Drover 2015: 52-55). These kinds of arguments give Ahmadi women an opening to differentiate between their "correct" interpretation of Islam, which provides them with education, rights, and respect, and other "false" interpretations of Islam, which misuse religion as a vehicle of women's oppression.

The messaging of the central Jamaat reflects an attitude that, as supposed "victims" of their religion, Muslim women themselves are in the best position to convince others of the freedom provided them by their faith. I attended one event in which the speaker, a local imam, posed questions like: Are women disadvantaged through Islam? Why do Muslim women wear headscarf? Is there a connection to terrorism? and urged his audience to ask women themselves, promising that our misconceptions would be corrected through personal encounter.[12] Many women identified media portrayals of the oppressed Muslim woman as a major societal problem—one even called it the most urgent problem facing society today—and were eager to defend Islam by refuting these accusations.

While my interlocutors' femaleness allows them to make certain arguments on behalf of the community, their positionality as members of the second-generation in Germany was equally important. Unlike the Jamaat's first generation, who emigrated from Pakistan in adulthood, these women were all born in Germany, speak German as their first language, and possess generally high levels of education and a strong sense of emotional belonging to the German nation. As such, they are uniquely able to interface with members of the wider German public on behalf of their religious community. It is these younger members who make up almost one hundred percent of the Jamaat's public face but a much smaller fraction of its actual membership.[13]

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat is a transnational, bureaucratically structured hierarchy headed by the highest Ahmadi spiritual authority, the *caliph*. All adult Ahmadi Muslim women are members of the women's wing, called the *Lajna Imaillah* (handmaidens of God), which was also true of the seven women I interviewed for this study.[14] Of these, two had leadership roles in the organisation, one was a prominent community spokeswoman, and of the rest, all but one were current or former members of the Lajna Imaillah's Committee for Interreligious Dialogue.[15] The Committee's declared goal is *Aufklärungsarbeit* (awareness-raising): providing un- or misinformed members of the wider public with correct information about the community and Islam in general. It is interesting to note that this committee falls under the purview of the Secretary of *Tabligh* (preaching or proselytisation) in the Jamaat's bureaucratic structure, indicating that the goals of clearing up misconceptions and attracting new members to the community overlap to some extent.

Making truth claims through performances of integration

Though Germany has long been a migration destination, beginning with the influx of Turkish guestworkers after the second world war, the German political establishment has been slow to embrace this new reality (Schirilla 2013: 8). Over the years, German *Leitkultur* (dominant culture) debates have grappled with the extent to which newcomers should be expected to assimilate to the mainstream (Mouritsen et al. 2019: 636-38). As Nijhawan effectively demonstrates, there is often more consensus around the need for conformity to certain core social precepts than is generally acknowledged by the left, which espouses a more multi-cultural narrative (Nijhawan 2010: 435). Embracing normative integration imperatives, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat eagerly positions itself as an ally of the secular liberal order whose members wholeheartedly embrace liberal values (Nijhawan 2016: 237).[16] I argue that these performances of integration bolster Ahmadi truth claims in several key ways, explored below. Here it is important to remember the disastrous consequences the community suffered as a direct result of their theological interpretation being legally negated on a national scale in Pakistan. By demonstrating that their version of Islam is uniquely acceptable to a major European nation-state such as Germany, Ahmadis are able to recoup some of this lost legitimacy, and with it, certain material and spiritual benefits.

Similar to other Muslim groups in minority settings (Fernando 2014), particularly revivalist ones (Ahmad 2009), Ahmadi-Germans are quick to emphasise the compatibility between their values and those of secular Europe, such as the importance of religious freedom, gender equity, and women’s right to education and to paid employment outside the home. Many interviewees point out that the caliph endorses democracy as the best form of government, relegating religion and politics to separate spheres and eschewing Islamism in all its forms. Additionally, all viewed it as their religious duty to cultivate loyalty to their nation—in this case, Germany—over any kind of Islamic state. This will be particularly important for understanding the connection between religious and state integration discourses. Finally, the Jamaat advocates peaceful resolution of conflict through nonviolent means, placing a particular emphasis on the importance of rational dialogue in the public sphere. Jihad is interpreted exclusively as "jihad of the pen" to defend Islam in verbal and scholarly debates (Hanson 2007). Underlying this position is the strong conviction that truth—in this case, their truth—will prevail in the marketplace of ideas and eventually gain acceptance in the wider society.

In order to draw convincing parallels between Ahmadi-Muslim and German values, the Jamaat showcases its second-generation members, who fully embody both Muslimness and Germanness. By being both devout Muslim believers and proper German citizens, second-generation Ahmadi-Germans demonstrate that the two ways of being are inherently compatible, overlapping, and perhaps even, at their core, the same. In order for this argument to be effective, however, it is important that second-generation members not only be fully German, but also seamlessly, effortlessly so, as internal conflict between the identities "Muslim" and "German" would also betray incongruences between (Ahmadi) Islam and the West. This "model Muslim minority" status, in turn, garners tangible measures of endorsement from the German state in the form of various integration awards[17], invitations to the interior ministry’s annual Islam Conference[18], the right to offer Islamic religion classes in some public schools[19], and special legal status in the states of Hessen and Hamburg, which allows the organisation to collect religious taxes and establish faith-based universities (Drover 2015: 46). Nearly all public Jamaat events I attended featured at least one local government official (police chief, state or local government representative, etc.) as guest speaker, who inevitably began his or her speech with warm praise for the group's progressive views.

All these forms of state recognition afford increased visibility to this numerically small denomination and legitimise Ahmadi claims that they are, in fact, Muslim. And not merely Muslim but "superior" Muslims. Ahmadis often contrast their integration success story, either explicitly or implicitly, with that of other minority groups living in "parallel societies" in the West as well as extremists who perpetrate terrorist violence in the name of Islam. The AMJD's ability to demonstrate that its values are in-step with those of the wider society, I speculate, makes its message more palatable to potential German converts. While *tabligh* (spreading the word about Islam) is in and of itself an important faith practice, growing numbers of Ahmadi faithful are considered further evidence of doctrinal truth (Evans 2017: 496). This creates a feedback loop whereby successful acts of proselytisation deepen already-believers' conviction in the truth of their message. By embodying a version of Islam that is uniquely acceptable to Europe, and increasingly embraced by European converts, Ahmadi-Germans are able to argue for their community's status as the one "true" Islam.

The role of discrimination in undermining truth claims

Thus far, it is clear that the Jamaat considers the superior integration status of its members an important sign of its message's truth. Going forward, it is important to understand the ways in which anti-Muslim discrimination undermines exactly this argument the Jamaat is trying to make. Ahmadi women assert that, when their religious practices are (falsely) identified as un-German and rejected by the mainstream society, it short-circuits the integration process, closing Muslim women out of the possibility for true belonging in their own homeland.

In an immigration studies context, integration is defined as, '"the extent to which immigrants, and especially their children, are able to participate in key mainstream institutions in ways that position them to advance socially and materially"' (cit. in Bozorgmehr & Kasinitz 2018: 5). We can think of integration as a fusion of newer social elements with existing ones. Though the onus is usually on immigrants to adapt their way of life to enable participation in these mainstream institutions, the process cuts both ways:

if the mainstream community and its institutions do not make space for relative newcomers, the integration project will fail.[20] At the heart of the integration debate is a contestation over which aspects of each community must be altered to make this fitting-together process work, to what degree, and at whose expense.

The primary issue at stake in this case study is the question of the Muslim headscarf or hijab. When asked about their reasons for covering their hair outside the home, a practice maintained by all respondents, most cited its Quranic origins and various intended spiritual and societal benefits, such as preserving appropriate behavior between the sexes, discouraging vanity and preoccupation with outer beauty, and as an act of self-sacrifice and dedication to God. Suggestions that the headscarf is patriarchal in nature and presents a double standard for men and women were vehemently denied and often countered with the observation that Islam also requires men to wear long beards and hats, and to avert their gaze from women in order to preserve appropriate distance between the sexes. Across the board, respondents emphasised repeatedly that wearing the headscarf is a personal choice and not coerced by male community members. In fact, the only coercion that does occur, they claim, is coercion from the state and/or mainstream society "not" to wear it.

One of the ways this coercion plays out is in institutional restrictions on how hijab-wearing women are allowed to inhabit the public sphere. In Germany, as in other European nations, legislation has been passed at the state and local level to restrict various forms of veiling in some public places (Bozorgmehr & Kasinitz 2018: 2). Between 2004 and 2009, eight of the country’s sixteen federal states passed legislation banning teachers from wearing the headscarf in class (Foner & Alba 2018: 24). In 2020, a court decision disallowed a headscarf-wearing woman from serving on the judge’s bench in the state of Hessen[21], and in May 2021, headscarves were forbidden for civil servants nation-wide.[22]

More present in the lives of the women I spoke with, however, were daily forms of street harassment and discrimination directed towards them as headscarf-wearers, including rude or aggressive questions, comments, gestures and glances, name-calling, and even violent actions, like being pushed or, in one instance, having the headscarf forcibly ripped off. Other times, particularly in education and employment, discrimination was suspected, though never proven. Nasim[23], for example, found it nearly impossible to gain employment in entry-level private sector jobs when she interviewed with the headscarf on. After months of fruitless job-searching, the only company that would hire her did so on the condition that she remove her headscarf at work so it wouldn't adversely affect the "work atmosphere". She complied—only to quit a short time later. Being at work without the headscarf felt too forced and inauthentic. In this situation, the binary choice Nasim was faced with—to be either a pious Muslim subject or an active economic subject in the German public sphere—forced a cleavage between her German and Muslim identities where she felt there should not have been one.

For Nasim and other Ahmadi-German women, the headscarf itself does not make them un-integrated; there is nothing inherently limiting about wearing a piece of cloth over one's hair, they argue. In fact, the headscarf should be a tool for realising simultaneous Muslim and German identities as its purpose is to enable women to live out their religious values while also fully participating in the public sphere. However, the general public's (mis)understanding of the headscarf as a tool of oppression against women creates the very conditions of that oppression—by limiting their access to education, gainful employment, and the ability to move about safely and unselfconsciously in public spaces. When perception of contradiction between Muslim vs. German, headscarf-wearing vs. integrated becomes pervasive at the societal level, it becomes self-fulfilling. To paraphrase the words of Sumaiyah, another respondant: when the headscarf-wearing woman is always seen as the cleaning lady, it ensures that she can never be anything else.

Many women attempt to overcome this double bind by actively countering what they see as false information and stereotypes about Islam and women. Many overwhelmingly felt that if the meaning of the headscarf and Islam more broadly were correctly understood, the perception-turned-reality of conflict between German and Islamic values would be dissolved. By changing the hearts and minds of their fellow citizens, Ahmadi women (re)shape their society into one that acknowledges Islam's inherent belonging, and by acknowledging it, create the conditions by which Islam and Muslims experience true belonging. In the next section, I will examine how this plays out in daily life as well as through concerted civil society and media interventions.

Realising integration through daily acts of representation

What follows are three anecdotes from my respondents' personal lives that demonstrate how their visibility as Muslim women guides their behavior in public so as to better reflect their integration. Through these daily acts of representation, they simultaneously form themselves into good Muslim and good German subjects and transform the wider society into one which is prepared to accept their claims to Islam's belonging in Germany. Sadia, now a university student, described being treated unfairly by teachers in high school:

> I was always viewed as a foreigner, even when I absolutely didn't feel that way. [...] That is sometimes such [a burden] for me because there are situations that really upset you, but you know you can't show this anger or indignation because when you wear the headscarf, it will be attributed to your religion.

In the face of discrimination, she chooses not to complain or even let her feelings show because these negative emotions would reflect poorly on Islam. Being aggressive or angry, even if such feelings are warranted under the circumstances, would demonstrate that Islam is aggressive and angry, thus confirming stereotypes about Islam's "foreignness" that justify further discrimination against Muslims.

Similarly, Sumaiyah decouples "Islam" and "foreign" in the minds of passersby with an act as simple as waiting for the light to turn green at the crosswalk. This is something only she, as a recognisable member of the Muslim faith can do:

> With me this role comes into play, this role of the role model (*Vorbilderrolle*) that I have to show. For example, it would be different if I jaywalk at a crosswalk than if I were to jaywalk without wearing the headscarf. With headscarf people think, ugh this foreigner with headscarf doesn't know how to obey the law in Germany. And that's why I always purposely wait at the red light (laughs) and don't walk. But also, because my belief prescribes that I'm supposed to obey the law of the land, that too in any case.

Sumaiyah doesn't express resentment at being forced into a representative role but embraces the higher standard to which she is held because it aids her in staying true to her values (in this case, loyalty to nation—by following the law of the land) in situations where she might otherwise be tempted to slip up. The headscarf forms Sumaiyah into both a good Muslim subject and a good German subject, the two of which are inseparable.

Amira, a stay-at-home mother, shared a story in which she and her husband were vacationing in a rural part of Germany, only to find themselves the target of stares and whispers from other hotel patrons. As a headscarf-wearer, Amira bore the brunt of this negative attention:

> That was so uncomfortable for me. That was really just like—where have I ended up? (*wo bin ich gelandet?*) That's why I.. in that moment, I was a little.. To get these looks, these stares.. But then my husband said, "why should we be ashamed?" That's just my character, I allow myself to be so easily shaken. But then on the second day, it was ok. We noticed that the people got used to us, nodded and smiled. It's just a matter of getting used to it (*das ist eine Gewöhnungssache*).

Amira's story follows a similar narrative arc in which a meaningful encounter with the "other" results in a deeper acceptance of the Jamaat's truth. Here it is not only Amira herself but also the other Germans in the story who come to accept the Jamaat's claim that Islam is compatible with the wider society. Acceptance is not a result of changing or adapting herself to try to be "more German", but of changing the attitudes of those around her to accept her Germanness. In doing so, she makes an argument that Muslimness need not be altered in order to belong to German society; rather, German society must be remade to acknowledge that Islam and those who practice it already belong. As Amira's story shows, this act of remaking happens through small, daily interactions.

Realising integration through civil society and media interventions

The representational role of Ahmadi-German women goes beyond day-to-day interactions as the Jamaat systematises such encounters through organised dialogue initiatives like "*Ich bin Muslima, haben Sie Fragen*?" (I am a Muslim, do you have questions?). Through this initiative, volunteers from local Jamaat chapters reach out to passersby in their communities—at train stations, in front of shops, or in other public places—and invite them to ask questions and engage in conversation. Participants are nearly exclusively second-generation women. The project's core assumption is that Germans' general understanding of Islam is unduly influenced by hostile mainstream media narratives, which in turn contribute to the institutional discrimination and everyday harassment Muslims in Germany face; if given the opportunity for personal encounter in which to hear about Islam in their own words, they hope, these misconceptions will inevitably melt away and be replaced by the realisation that Muslim Germans have more core similarities than differences with their non-Muslim neighbors.

Amira sums up this line of thinking in her email reflection on the outcomes of "Ich bin Muslima, haben Sie fragen?" writing: 'This campaign was a very good and necessary initiative through which I noticed that there is a huge need for awareness. Most of the conversations with my dialogue partners ended with an Aha moment and a smile'.

Here she uses the same narrative arc as before—lack of understanding, dialogue or personal encounter, deeper understanding and acceptance—to speak about her experience as a visible representative of Islam. This narrative also plays well in local newspapers, which are regularly supplied with press releases and invited to cover the community's outreach initiatives. In offering up its own alternative, Islam-positive media narrative, the Jamaat hopes to exponentially increase the reach of these systematised "personal" encounters for maximum societal impact.[24] The ultimate goal is to produce "Aha-moments" on a mass scale, which will translate into social change.

True Muslims, true Germans

This emphasis on bringing about social change through debate and exchange of ideas in the public sphere is important. It gives the Ahmadis an opening to demonstrate, not only that they are inherently German by virtue of their Muslim values, but that these values engender *exceptional* Germanness. Participants in the initiative often contrasted their peaceful efforts to promote a healthy democracy with the behavior of some passers-by, who simply hurled racist or Islamophobic insults and moved on without engaging in conversation. More broadly, the same lines of contrast were drawn between the exemplary democratic practices of the Jamaat and the anti-democratic tendencies of right-wing parties, such as the AfD, which itself accuses Islam and Muslims of being essentially un-German. Here Ahmadi Muslims position themselves as the true liberal democratic citizens as opposed to right-wingers, who refuse to engage in dialogue and enforce their opinions through threats and violence.

A similar line of thinking emerged in how women spoke about gender equality and women's agency, with women's clothing choice being a common talking point. Many observed that the tenets of secular liberal democracy promise equal treatment of women as rational beings capable of making their own decisions. In practice, however, decisions that deviate from the mainstream—the wish to cover oneself in a certain way, for example—are not recognised as the choice of a free agent. This was communicated particularly clearly by Zahab, a volunteer member of the Lajna Imaillah leadership committee, who regularly participates in dialogue initiatives in which the headscarf is thematised. In such conversations, Zahab emphasises that she only began wearing the headscarf as an adult after much thought and consideration, providing all manner of rational arguments for her choice—creation of a de-sexualised atmosphere, physical reminder of God’s presence, steers focus to inner values vs. outer appearance, etc. At the conclusion of the exchange, however, many of her conversation partners remain not only unconvinced of Zahab’s arguments but often express the opinion that her "decision" to wear the headscarf is not a free one but rather the result of patriarchal brainwashing. Zahab interpreted this refusal to acknowledge the agency and rationality of an individual with whom one disagrees as a glaring hypocrisy. In contrast, many of the women interviewed expressed their support for a full spectrum of women’s clothing choice, 'from bikini to burqa'.

In this anecdote, Zahab argues that her faith makes her uniquely able to live out authentic tolerance. She acts as true advocate of the rationally choosing individual that is the building block of a free, liberal, and democratic society, while others only consider those choices to be rational that are acceptable to the mainstream. In posing these critiques, the intent is not only to defend Islam but to perform an act of service to the nation. When I asked Sumaiyah if she was concerned about the rise of the AfD and its Islamophobic platform, for example, she answered that she was—not (only) because such a platform would hurt the Ahmadi community’s interests but because an attack on pluralism is an attack on her country. Countering such attacks thus becomes both a religious and civic duty, with both facets mutually reinforcing each other.

Conclusion: truth in progress

In this paper, I have examined the ways in which the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Deutschland makes claims to represent "true" Islam. These claims are directed toward transnational publics, such as competing Muslim factions, as well as more local audiences at home in Germany. Support from the German government and civil society lends legitimacy to these truth claims, which in turn has a big effect on the daily ground realities and sense of belonging Ahmadi-Germans experience. In exhorting believers to cultivate loyalty to the liberal-democratic German nation, the Jamaat effectively gives state integration imperatives the force of religious doctrine. Through performances of integration—waiting for the light to change at a crosswalk, taking to the streets to promote interreligious dialogue, or simply existing unapologetically in public spaces—Ahmadi-German women simultaneously form themselves into more pious Muslim subjects (who defend the faith and increases its visibility) and more perfect liberal democratic subjects (who follow the law of the land and participates in crucial civil discourse). Both of these are inextricably intertwined.

Complying with the imperative to integrate, however, does not mean women do so uncritically. In positing the Ahmadi-German citizen as a true liberal democratic subject (one who is committed to non-violent public sphere dialogue and acknowledges the rationality of freely choosing individuals), women unsettle a sedimented understanding of proper German cultural citizenship. In this way, living out the faith is as much about forming the individual and community in accordance with religious doctrine as it is a process of shaping the wider society into one that better reflects these truths as well.

Unlike religious minorities in other precarious contexts, who employ performances of identity as a survival strategy (Schaflechner 2020; Ahmed-Ghosh 2004), here believers are doing more than surviving; they are attempting to create an environment in which they can truly thrive—as both devout Muslims and engaged German citizens. In doing so, they hope the light of their faith will shine out beyond the borders of their own community to where the message might find fertile ground. Believers do so, however, without claiming that secular liberal institutions and societies must fundamentally change to accommodate Muslim values and ways of life; rather, they must adhere more closely to values that are constantly claimed but rarely lived up to: values like freedom (for all to safely inhabit the public space), equality (of opportunity for people of any religious persuasion), recognition of individual autonomy (to choose the headscarf or not) and open dialogue in the marketplace of ideas (exemplified by initiatives like "Ich bin Muslima, haben Sie fragen?"). It is precisely Ahmadi Islam, they argue, that can restore Europe to its foundations in the face of looming right-wing populism.

These critiques from the margins are all the more relevant in the current political climate, in which right-wing actors increasingly '"explain" complex social integration problems by the "unwillingness of Muslims to assimilate" or "incompatibility of Islam and liberal democracy"' (cit. in Stratham 2018: 54). If given the chance, these arguments could be used to strip Muslim citizens of their rights, thus undermining liberal democracy itself—which, Sumaiyah observes, is an existential problem for Muslim and non-Muslim Germans alike. In this vein, Talal Asad warns us that

> If Europe cannot be articulated in terms of complex space and complex time that allow for multiple ways of life (and not merely identities) to flourish, it may be fated to be no more than the common market of an imperial civilization, always anxious about (Muslim) exiles within its gates and (Muslim) barbarians beyond. (2003: 180)

In calling their country back to its values, which are also Muslim values, the Ahmadiyya envision a world in which the arch of modernity bends towards Islam. Ultimately, Islam's inherent Germanness and Germany's inherent Muslimness is a truth in progress—a truth in the process of becoming—and second-generation Ahmadi-German women enable it to become.

Endnotes

[1] International Organization for Migration [IOM]. 2018. *World Migration Report,* https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2018 [retrieved 01.10.22].

[2] Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung. n.d. *Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund (2005-2019)*. https://www.bib.bund.de/Permalink.html?id=10343516 [retrieved 19.08.21].

[3] Here I accept the community's Muslim self-classification and refer to them as such. I use the terms "Ahmadi Islam" and "Ahmadi Muslims", though my interlocutors typically refer to themselves simply as Muslim and to their religion as Islam. These qualifiers are used heuristically for the sake of clarity and are not meant to indicate skepticism toward Ahmadi claims to be members of the Islamic faith.

[4] With the term "Ahmadi-German" I adapt Mayanthi Fernando's "Muslim French", which, in reversing the usual "French Muslim" identifier purposefully creates a linguistically awkward term meant to destabilise the privileging of religious over national identity (2014).

[5] Schäfers, Burkhard. 2016. Ahmadiyya in Deutschland: Splittergruppe oder Muslimische Elite? *Deutschlandfunk*, 28 Sept., https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ahmadiyya-in-deutschland-splittergruppe-oder-muslimische.2540.de.html?dram:article_id=366558 [retrieved 01.10.22].

[6] Jonker, Gerdien & Martin Herzog. 2013. Erstmals erhalten Muslime Körperschaftsstatus.

Mediendienst Integration, 21 June, https://mediendienst-integration.de/de/artikel/erstmals-erhalten-muslime-koerperschaftsstatus.html [retrieved 01.10.22].

[7] For a few exceptions, see: Nijhawan 2016, Balzani 2020.

[8] The Turkish-German community is one notable exception.

[9] Though not exclusively. For example, see: Nijhawan 2010: 432.

[10] My approach here has been influenced by Nicholas Evans' work on the Ahmadiyya in Qadian (2017).

[11] Here I follow Saba Mahmood in positing that outward performances of piety play a role in retroactively forming pious subjectivities (2012).

[12] The community hosts regular outreach events to which the general public is invited. These include lecture series, panel debates, and open-door days at local mosques. I conducted participant observation at several of these official Jamaat events as well as informal gatherings with individual interlocutors and their families.

[13] Through the course of my fieldwork, it wasn't until I began socialising with Jamaat members privately and found myself surrounded by Urdu-speaking "aunties" that I realised how overrepresented second-generation members generally are in Jamaat outreach initiatives.

[14] My one-time, semi-structured interviews were conducted in German and took 1.5-2.5 hours with follow-ups as needed. The excerpts used here have been translated from German by me.

[15] The majority of Committee for Interreligious Dialogue volunteers are second generation members; these are the individuals whom the Jamaat makes immediately available to outsiders seeking more information about the community (including researchers). I found accessing non-Committee-member Ahmadis difficult and accessing internal events impossible due to the Jamaat organisation's strict gate-keeping structures. These limitations had a big impact on the scope of my research and is a central reason I focus on the Jamaat's public face.

[16] For further discussion of this phenomenon in the context of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Canada, see: Tanveer, Rana. 2020. Ahmadiyya and secularism: religious persecution at home affects endorsement for secular values in Canada. *Religion and Culture Major Research Papers,* 3, pp. 1-51, https://scholars.wlu.ca/rlc_mrp/3/ [retrieved 01.10.22].

[17] Wydra, Denise. 2020. Nähen und Blutspende: Integrationspreis an Ahmadiyya-Gemeinde. *Osthessen Zeitung*, 2 Oct., https://www.osthessen-zeitung.de/einzelansicht/news/2020/oktober/naehen-und-blutspenden-integrationspreis-an-ahmadiyya-gemeinde.html [retrieved 01.10.22].

[18] Pressestelle der Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Deutschland. 2014. *Teilnahme der Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat an der Deutschen Islam Konferenz*. 24 Mar., https://ahmadiyya.de/news/pressemitteilungen/art/teilnahme-der-ahmadiyya-muslim-jamaat-an-der-deutschen-islam-konferenz/ [retrieved 01.10.22].

[19] Jonker, Gerdien & Martin Herzog. 2013. Erstmals erhalten Muslime Körperschaftsstatus.

Mediendienst Integration, 21 June., https://mediendienst-integration.de/de/artikel/erstmals-erhalten-muslime-koerperschaftsstatus.html [retrieved 01.10.22].

[20] Angela Merkel said it best when she declared 'Integration is not a one-way street' at the 2014 Integration Summit. See: Ehrenstein, Claudia. 2014. Merkel: Integration ist keine Einbahnstraße. *Die Welt*, 2 Dec., https://www.welt.de/print/die_welt/politik/article134922243/Merkel-Integration-ist-keine-Einbahnstrasse.html [retrieved 01.10.22].

[21] Semmelroch, Anja. 2020. Bundesverfassungsgericht billigt Verbot für Rechtsreferendarinnen in Hessen: Justitia muss auf das Kopftuch verzichten. *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, 27 Feb., https://www.saarbruecker-zeitung.de/nachrichten/politik/inland/bundesverfassungesgericht-billigt-kopftuchverbot-fuer-rechtsreferendarinnen_aid-49254925 [retrieved 03.10.22].

[22] Rath, Christian. 2021. Kein Tattoo, kein Kopftuch. *Die Tageszeitung*, 29 May, https://taz.de/Neue-Regeln-fuer-Beamtinnen/!5766123/ [retrieved 03.10.22].

[23] All respondents' names have been changed in the interest of their privacy.

[24] The mainstream German media's allegedly unfair treatment of Islam was mentioned by every respondent in this study. Nearly all could cite an article or news report they felt portrayed Islam and Muslims in an unnecessarily bad light. The initiatives discussed above are not the only strategies used to combat bad press. The Ahmadi students' organisation, for example, regularly holds letter-writing campaigns to various news outlets refuting specific stories they feel portray a false narrative of Islam. The Jamaat's legal team also takes action against libelous media reports, as they did against sociologist Necla Kelek, who gave a particularly damning assessment of the Jamaat in her interview with *die Welt*. See: Kelek, Necla & Susanne Fritz. 2017. 'Alles andere als weltoffen.' *Deutschlandfunk*, 23 Aug.,https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/necla-kelek-ueber-die-ahmadiyya-alles-andere-als-weltoffen.886.de.html?dram:article_id=394068 [retrieved 01.01.22]. The legal victory was hailed as a refutation of *Falschbehauptungen* (false statements) against Ahmadi Islam. See: Pressestelle der Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Deutschland. 2020. Islamischer Verband wehrt sich mit Erfolg gegen

rechtswidrige Falschbehauptungen von Soziologin Necla Kelek, n.d., https://ahmadiyya.de/news/pressemitteilungen/art/islamischer-verband-wehrt-sich-mit-erfolg-gegen-rechtswidrige-falschbehauptungen-von-soziologin-necl/ [retrieved 09.11.20]; A full analysis of the Jamaat's public relations strategy, however, is outside the scope of this study.

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