Nationalities Papers, 2017
Vol. 45, No. 4, 581–597, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2017.1298579

"Islamic cafés" and "Sharia dating:" Muslim youth, spaces of sociability, and partner relationships in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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(*Received 7 February 2016; accepted 17 July 2016*)

The paper explores forms of sociability and partner relationships among pious young Muslims in Sarajevo with a focus on the emic concepts of Islamic cafés (hospitality establishments perceived to operate according to Islamic moral principles) and Sharia dating (premarital relationships perceived to be sanctioned by Sharia). It draws on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in different spaces of Islamic worship, learning, and sociability. This paper places the renewed interest in Islam within the context of a post-Dayton Bosnia characterized by complex and impractical government structures, lingering post-war grievances, and a brutal transition to a neoliberal capitalist economy. Although it acknowledges the continuing relevance of Islam as a resource for Bosniak nation building, it suggests treating the Muslim faith community as overlapping but distinct from the Bosniak community. By focusing on gendered interaction and partner-seeking strategies, this paper explores how young members of this faith community contextually negotiate their Islamic beliefs with mainstream local expectations of conventional behavior. The paper argues that believers' varying responses to this predicament can be observed as an example of the localization of Islam, but they do not constitute a return to local, traditional gender roles and marriage practices, nor are they an introduction of foreign cultural patterns.

Keywords: Islamic revival; sociability; dating and marriage practices; community; Bosnia-Herzegovina

> He asked me: do you date the Sharia way? And then I found that interesting. What's the Sharia way and what's the non-Sharia way? It was a [new] phenomenon for me. How can you debate that? How can you debate whether you date the Sharia way or the non-Sharia way? What's that other way? / … / I said explain to me what's the Sharia way, and he said: it's when you don't have physical contact. I said, aha, so that's the Sharia way and what's the non-Sharia way then? And he said: that's when you have [physical] contact with the person you're going out with. (Excerpt from interview with Emina,[1] aged 21, February 2007)

Post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia) has been experiencing a revival of Islam, the beginnings of which can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s (Sorabji 1989; Bougarel 1997; Karčić 2009, 30–31). This period witnessed an increase in Islamic publishing and the building of mosques, the opening of several institutions of Islamic learning, and greater public engagement of the *ulema* (Islamic scholars) (Bougarel 1997, 541–543;

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Karčić 2009, 30–31; Moe 2009a, 105; Sarač-Rujanac 2012, 62–72). Particularly from the 1980s onwards, this revival became increasingly interconnected with political endeavors to define Bosniak/Bosnian Muslim identity.[2] The link between ethnic and religious identity (Sorabji 1989, 1994; Bringa 1993, 1995) and the co-optation of religion for political purposes, particularly during the war in the 1990s (Vrcan 1998; Bougarel 2001; Iveković 2002; Velikonja 2003), led to the perception of the Islamic revival as an expression of rising Bosniak nationalism. However, recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of the religious dimension of Islamic revival in Bosnia and the wider Balkan region (Ghodsee 2009; Ibrahimpašić 2012; Henig and Bielenin-Lenczowska 2013; Elbasani and Roy 2015a, 2015b; Elbasani and Tošić 2017).

Although I acknowledge the continuing relevance of Islam as a resource for Bosniak nation building, in this paper I turn my attention to how Islam shapes the lived experience of pious Muslims. Looking at Islamic revival through the lens of piety opens up new analytical perspectives that allow us to observe how personal faith shapes the life choices of Muslim believers and drives the grassroots transformation of Muslim communities. This article explores the relationship between personal faith and communal identities and values in everyday practice. It looks at how young people negotiate authoritative Islamic texts, personal belief, local traditional Muslim practices, and wider societal norms largely shaped by socialist and post-socialist secularism as they try to lead their lives as believers.

The main focus of the article is an aspect of daily life often overlooked in analyses of Islamic revival in the Balkans – the social and dating lives of young people and the spaces it unfolds in. This interaction is analyzed through two emic concepts that emerged as salient notions in the Sarajevo Muslim faith community during my fieldwork: Islamic cafés and Sharia dating. My analysis is based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted on several trips between 2005 and 2010. The majority of the ethnographic material analyzed here was gathered during two three-month trips in 2007 and 2008. Over the course of my fieldwork, I visited a range of spaces frequented by believers including mosques, *tekkes* (Sufi meeting rooms), civil society associations, and cafés as well as informal gatherings held in private homes. I spoke primarily with women whom I met in these spaces and who identified as pious Muslims, as well as others whom I met through their personal networks. Our conversations focused on their respective journeys to becoming a believer and the ways they try to live a pious life in an environment they generally consider to be impious. Our conversations often involved informal socializing, providing ample opportunity to observe women's and mixed-gender forms of sociability. While the overall argument developed in this paper relates to both young men and women, it is based predominantly on conversations with women and, therefore, primarily conveys women's understanding and experiences of Islamic sociability and dating practices.

The article should be read as an insight into the lives of young Muslim believers in Sarajevo, a city that occupies a specific place in Bosnia's contemporary Islamic landscape. Sarajevo is the country's capital and largest city, and since the end of the war, it has been populated predominantly by Bosniaks. Here, Muslims can find the greatest number and diversity of Islamic spaces in Bosnia. It is the seat of several Islamic institutions, including the Islamic Community (the official body charged with managing Islamic religious affairs), a male and female madrasa,[3] and the Faculty of Islamic Studies at the (public) University of Sarajevo. Sarajevo is also the seat of two private Turkish universities (where classes are conducted in English). One is linked to the neo-Sufi Gülen movement. The majority of the students attending these two universities come from Turkey. At the time of fieldwork, many of them were women avoiding the university headscarf ban in their native country.

Although pious students represent a minority within the total student population in Sarajevo, many of them are involved in Islamic civil society organizations or informal student-led initiatives centered around religion. The city has a significant number of civil society organizations with Islamic underpinnings catering primarily to young people and women (Helms 2003; Spahić-Šiljak 2007; Moe 2009a). Some of these organizations' activities are limited to those with an explicitly religious focus, such as Qur'an study groups or discussions on aspects of Islam and life as a believer. Others offer employment training programs and social events. While there are a number of international Islamic organizations present in Sarajevo, including NGOs and foreign governmental organizations, most Islamic civil society organizations are locally run.[4]

Some of the discussion presented within this article is either more prevalent or specific to Bosnia's capital. Particularly in areas of the country where Bosniaks do not constitute a majority, some of the practices discussed below that in Sarajevo mark the boundaries of the faith community might be more readily interpreted as markers of Bosniak ethnic identity. Nevertheless, much of the insight presented in this article would resonate with young Muslim believers beyond Sarajevo.

The paper proceeds in three parts. First, it outlines pious Muslims' relationship to their faith and their fellow believers, exploring how creating a faith community enables people to cope with the uncertainties of life in post-conflict, post-socialist Bosnian society marked by political corruption, economic insecurity, and a lack of future prospects. Second, this paper analyzes Islamic forms of sociability, the spaces in which they are embedded, and the rules of gendered interaction that serve as their underpinning. It highlights the ways in which spaces of Islamic worship and study also serve as spaces of sociability, and it examines hospitality establishments perceived to operate in accord with the rules of Islam, colloquially called Islamic cafés. This section also outlines how pious Muslim women negotiate rules of gendered interaction in different spaces and social situations. Finally, the paper turns to marriage and partner relationships and takes a closer look at a practice referred to by some pious Muslims as "Sharia dating." These premarital relationships, in which the couple avoids any physical contact, serve as a testing ground for marriage compatibility. Many Muslims see this practice as distinctly Bosnian in comparison with Arab marriage practices, which are often perceived in culturally essentialized ways. The final section also highlights views of stricter Muslim believers who doubt the validity of Islamic premarital relationships, yet maintain a belief in the importance of partner compatibility in a marriage. In conclusion, the paper argues that even though some young believers espouse what could be seen as conservative views on gender, their dating and marriage practices do not represent a "return" to traditional practices and gender roles.

Believers and faith communities in an impious environment

Many have observed the heightened Islamic character of Sarajevo that developed over the last two decades, noting primarily the construction of new mosques (with particular attention to their calls to prayer) and a more visible public practice of Islam (Bartulović 2013, 250–277; Tošić 2015). My interlocutors, particularly those who had moved from other parts of Bosnia and especially those who wore hijab, appreciated the fact that Sarajevo offers more spaces welcoming to Muslim believers than the rest of the country. However, even though Sarajevo has a strong Bosniak majority, they understood believers to be a minority in a city that was in many ways perceived as an impious environment. Pious Muslims seeing themselves as a minority in what they understand to be an immoral and hostile environment, even if nominally Muslim, is characteristic of revivalist forms of

religiosity globally (Roy 2004; Mahmood 2005). However, to fully understand the shape this has taken in Bosnia, one needs to take into consideration the country's recent experiences with war, displacement, and transition to a neoliberal political economy.

Four years of armed conflict (1992–1995) in Bosnia resulted in mass displacement and a devastated economy. The Dayton Peace Accords that ended the war set up a government structure that is widely seen as untenable and has been criticized for being discriminatory to citizens who fall outside of the three officially recognized "constitutive nations" of Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. Bosnia comprises the Bosniak and Croat majority Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Serb majority Republika Srpska, and Brčko District (where no single group has a majority), each with its own government. The country is led by a rotating three-member presidency, with each member representing one of the constitutive nations. This complex structure was intended to guarantee equal representation; however, it has made efficient governance a challenge. Furthermore, it guarantees political representation to the three dominant groups at the expense of Jewish, Roma, and other minority groups as well as anyone choosing to identify as Bosnian (Markowitz 2007, 59; Perry 2015, 62–63; Armakolas and Maksimović 2014, 62–63; Jansen 2015; Larise 2015, 209).

Neoliberal economic restructuring and privatization of collectively owned state enterprises marked by corruption further destabilized the sociopolitical and economic landscape. Secure jobs and housing that constituted "normality" in socialist Yugoslavia were replaced with precarity and soaring unemployment that are just as much a feature of post-Dayton Bosnia as ethnic quota governance (Baker 2012; Palmberger 2013; Jansen 2015; Kurtović 2015). A "general sense of futurelessness" (Kurtović 2015, 639) has been accompanied by a pervasiveness of moral claims and categories that Bougarel, Helms, and Duijzings (2007, 34) consider one of the main defining characteristics of post-war Bosnian political and social life. The breakdown of social relationships during the war and the years of corruption and unsuccessful economic reconstruction that followed have led to a lack of trust among Bosnians in their fellow human beings, and the future. It is important to see the Islamic revival as deeply embedded in a social context where pious Muslims and other Bosnians alike feel that people have "gone bad," becoming selfish and having no respect for others.

Creating a community of believers

Creating an imagined community (Anderson 1991) of believers enables people to deal with what they perceive as moral chaos rampant in post-war Bosnian society. Muslim believers view Islam as protection from the lack of morals that they believe to be characteristic of the politically corrupt and economically unstable environment in which they live. Although this immoral environment is understood to include alcohol and drug consumption and sex outside of marriage, the primary concern is on the lack of supportive interpersonal relationships. Creating a "moral" community challenges the disintegration of social relationships and offers an alternative to the alienation and lack of trust experienced in wider society. Many Bosnians feel that the war destroyed the social institution of *komšiluk* (neighborliness), a relationship implying an obligation of mutual support between neighbors (Sorabji 2007; Helms 2010; Bartulović 2013, 106–130). It is possible to interpret the faith community, and particularly communities attached to specific spaces of Islamic worship, learning, and sociability, as actively working to fill the gap created by the demise of *komšiluk*: if one can no longer turn to neighbors for help, one can still expect it from fellow believers. The Muslim faith community thus provides people with a

feeling of safety and predictability that is sorely lacking in wider Bosnian society and a space where one can rely on fellow human beings for support.

Although my interlocutors generally recognized and valued the role of Islam in Bosniak cultural heritage and identity, they saw it as secondary to personal faith. They distinguished between the Bosniak community and faith community as two overlapping — but by no means identical — units. Based on the premise that one becomes a Muslim by choice, the faith community relatively easily incorporates people of mixed backgrounds, as well as non-Bosniak converts from Bosnia and elsewhere. Although the number of converts is relatively low, it is not insignificant, and converts often serve as evidence of Islam's appeal. It could be argued that some believers see Islam as a way of avoiding prescribed ethnic categories, or, at the very least, a means to challenge nationalist discourses. This is not true of all who stress piety over identity, but I spoke with a number of believers whose narratives suggested that this might be the case. Bosnians of mixed background have a particular stake in adopting this approach, as they do not fit the normative frame. Mirela, the child of a Bosniak mother and a Serb father, explained being a Muslim as incompatible with being a nationalist:

> The problem we have here [in Bosnia] is one of nationalism, because people are nationalist. But the problem isn't in religion. There are a lot of people who don't practice but are nationalists. Islam doesn't know that. It says an Arab doesn't have precedence over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab [have precedence] over an Arab. Allah distinguishes people solely by *bogabojaznost* (God-fearingness).

In a political system based on the representation of particular ethnic groups rather than the representation of citizens, people look for different ways of escaping narrowly defined ethnic identities into which they are being made to belong to. There is a growing body of literature focusing on those who actively oppose nationalist discourse, primarily by highlighting an overarching Bosnian identity and thus avoiding having to identify as Bosniak, Serb, or Croat (Markowitz 2007; Jansen 2008, 2015; Bartulović 2013). Though it requires further exploration, joining a faith community and stressing its religious nature could be seen as an alternative way of de-emphasizing one's ethnic background.

Differentiating Bosniaks and Muslim believers as interlinked yet distinct conceptual communities should frame our understanding of particular phenomena, including Islamic dress practices and the use of Muslim greetings. The increase in women wearing headscarves and using the greeting "salaam alaikum" (*selam alejkum*) in public is often perceived as an expression of nationalism. This is not surprising, considering that Bosniak political elites actively promoted Islam as instrumental to Bosniak identity beginning before the breakup of Yugoslavia. This connection was bolstered by the political involvement of the Islamic Community, the official religious authority, especially after its restructuring from a pan-Yugoslav to a Bosniak institution in 1993 (Bougarel 1997; Hećimović 2008; Larise 2015). The campaign preceding the 2013 national population census, the first since Bosnia's independence, made it clear that political elites and the Islamic Community still see Bosniak identity as synonymous with a Muslim religious identity (Armakolas and Maksimović 2014; Perry 2015). Politicians have been known to begin addresses to their Bosniak constituents with *selam alejkum*, tinting the greeting with more than a hint of political color. Yet, in believers' daily usage, Islamic greetings, as well as other practices such as dress, can be observed less as a political statement than as an extension of a personal religiosity, where one's entire life is rooted in religious practice.

Especially in Bosniak majority areas such as Sarajevo, dress and language serve to create and maintain the boundaries of a moral community of believers rather than of the Bosniak ethno-national community. Women who wear hijab often greet each other in public with *selam alejkum*, a practice referred to by the verb *selamljenje*, even if they do

not know each other. Sometimes, women who do not wear hijab themselves address those who do with this greeting.[5] For Halima, *selamljenje* served as a way of befriending a group of pious Muslim women at her university at a time when she was just discovering her interest in Islam: "I would see a few covered[6] girls at university, but I didn't know any of them. So I began greeting them with *selam alejkum* (*selamiti*), and then we eventually started hanging out." *Selamljenje* can create a feeling of mutuality between people who do not know each other, and it creates a feeling of community that outsiders sometimes find difficult to understand. The hijab clearly serves a symbolic function in these interactions, as it allows people to recognize fellow Muslims. In a predominantly Bosniak setting, such as Sarajevo, it symbolizes connection to a pious Muslim community first and Bosniak identity second.

Finding personal faith

The difference between an ethno-national community and a faith community is built on the distinction between believers and nominal Muslims, a common characteristic of Islamic revival worldwide. One can be born a Muslim, but a person only becomes a believer (*mumin* or *vjernik* (m.), *vjernica* (f.)) through a deliberate crafting of a particular kind of self. In her ethnography of a multiethnic faith community of young Muslims in Berlin, Synnøve Bendixsen describes crafting a religious self as a continuous and creative process of becoming a virtuous or good Muslim pursued by an individual, that is nevertheless situated within power relations (2013, 22–24). Although this process does not unfold in isolation from the faith community and is shaped in interaction with religious and wider societal norms, it reflects the centrality of the individual in contemporary religious revival movements. According to Roy (2004), Islamic revival movements are characterized by a shift from religion to religiosity, that is, an individual believer's relationship to religion and his or her experience of faith. This individualization of religiosity, where the self is at the center of the religious experience, is characteristic of modernity and a shared trait of Islamic revival and other religious revival movements (Roy 2004).[7]

During my time in Sarajevo, the people I spoke to would often use phrases such as "before I was in the faith," or "now that I'm in the faith," even if they had been born as Muslims. *Vjera* (faith) or *iman* was central to their definition of being a good Muslim (cf. Ibrahimpašić 2012, 189–190), and being *u vjeri* (in the faith) was a common way for pious Muslims to refer to people who shared their approach to Islam. They would stress that having a Muslim name or Muslim parents does not make one a Muslim. My interlocutors used the phrase "Muslim by name" not only to refer to people of Muslim descent who are not religious, but also for those who consider themselves religious but do not practice Islam. It could also extend to include Muslims who perform some of the core religious practices such as daily prayers and fasting, but whose religious beliefs do not inform their daily lives beyond religious rituals. The reproach to nominal Muslims is, therefore, not necessarily their lack of faith. What is seen as problematic is a form of religiosity that treats religion as an abstract value system (cf. Mahmood 2005, 44). A Muslim believer's whole life can become an aspect of religious practice. This does not necessarily involve a scriptural literalism prescribing the minutiae of daily life, but rather a lifestyle where a believer is continually aware of God, that is, *svjestan* (m.) *or svjesna* (f.)), and this awareness informs how she conducts herself in everyday life. This is reflected in believers' deliberate use of God's name in their daily interactions with phrases such as *subhanallah* (glory to God), *elhamdulilah* (thanks to God), *estagfirullah* (I ask forgiveness of God), and *inshallah* (if God wills it) or, more commonly, the Bosnian version, *ako Bog da* (Ibrahimpašić 2012, 187).

My pious interlocutors stressed the importance of a person's intent or *niyah* (*nijet*) (Mesarič 2013, 13–14); therefore, a good deed done for the sake of God and an equivalent good deed not done with God in mind do not have equal value. *Ibadat* (*ibadet*) is a term generally used for describing the field of worship and religious ritual. But from this perspective, any action a believer performs with the intent of worshiping and pleasing God could be transformed into *ibadat*, however secular it might seem to an outsider (cf. Mahmood 2005, 46–47). This emphasis on enacting all aspects of one's life with awareness of God is common among believers across the spectrum of Islamic revival. Regardless of the differences in how it might unfold in practice, this principle underpins the lifestyles of both mainstream pious Muslims and Salafis. Both perceive individual agency as central to becoming a believer (cf. Roy 2004). Those of my interlocutors who had been influenced by Salafism described becoming believers as a conscious personal choice in much the same way as my more liberal interlocutors.[8] They both contrasted the importance of the individual's decision-making involved in becoming a believer with what they understood as unreflected traditional practices and customs followed by their ancestors (Funk 2015; Olson 2015; Olson 2017). Accounts of their personal discoveries of faith also made it evident that individuals pass through different stages of engagement with various kinds of Islamic discourse and practice. They might lean toward Salafism at one point in their journey, then move to Sufism or more mainstream interpretations of Islam later on, or vice versa. Some believers even draw on several of these sources at the same time. Despite being pitted against each other in media and public discourse, moderate pious Muslims — who are often associated with Bosnian Islam — and Salafis — who are seen as epitomizing foreign influences — share a similar individualized religiosity and an opt-in approach to becoming a Muslim believer. This highlights the futility of trying to establish a clear-cut separation between "domestic" and "imported" Islamic practices in Bosnia (Mesarič 2013, 2015).

Islamic forms of sociability

Spaces of Islamic worship and learning as spaces of sociability

Sarajevo has many spaces where pious young Muslims can meet and mix. Unsurprisingly, these often overlap with spaces of transmission of Islamic knowledge. The city has a range of venues where believers of both genders can deepen their knowledge of Islam and meet other believers (Mesarič 2015). Certain mosques hold discussion groups and gatherings in addition to ritual prayers, many of them specifically aimed at young people. Some imams and Sufi sheikhs have attracted sizable followings by adopting an approach that shows people the relevance of Islam in dealing with challenges they face in their everyday lives. Youth and women's civil society organizations offer religious courses and talks (Helms 2003; Spahić-Šiljak 2007; Moe 2009a). Student halls hold religious talks with guest speakers, often facilitated by student associations or informal groups of students. Believers meet in private homes to discuss Islam or practice reading the Quran. Some of these spaces are reserved for exclusively men or women. Many others offer young people an opportunity to socialize in gender-mixed groups, though following particular patterns of interaction such as avoiding physical contact and sitting in separate parts of the room.

Pious Muslims frequent these spaces for a variety of reasons: The talks help them expand their knowledge of Islam; they learn from their peers, especially about how to make sure their faith translates into everyday practice. Sometimes they are attracted to these spaces by a feeling of community that they find lacking elsewhere. Formal associations and informal groups of young people sometimes use these spaces as a platform for small-scale humanitarian appeals to plug the gaps left behind by the near collapse of

the welfare state (cf. Brković 2014). Ehlimana, who had been involved with several such initiatives, explained: "Young people are active in these associations because they see they can't change anything in politics. So they try to help people this way and achieve at least small changes for the better."

Another important motivation for young people to visit these spaces is an occasion to socialize. Nedžada, who attended gender-mixed youth gatherings at the same mosque as Ehlimana, described the different views of young people in the group:

> There's a sort of disagreement between those who want to have mainly talks and those who prefer to socialize. I mean, we like having a humanitarian appeal occasionally and a talk followed by socializing, but what's most important for us is the socializing (*druženje*). We have enough lectures at university, especially those of us from the Faculty of Islamic Studies. It's difficult to offer young people something that will convince them to go there instead of going to a club or café.

These gatherings represent an alternative to entertainment venues normally frequented by young people but generally avoided by believers. What is valued by young believers is not just the opportunity to socialize, but rather an opportunity to socialize with like-minded peers in an environment perceived as morally sound. Even though gatherings like the one attended by Ehlimana and Nedžada have a primarily religious focus, they also serve as a platform for young people to make connections and form friendships with other believers that extend beyond the group meetings.

Islamic cafés: a moral space inhabited by believers

Although young believers avoid going to regular cafés, many young people spend their free time socializing in hospitality establishments that many pious Muslims in Sarajevo colloquially refer to as *islamski kafići* (Islamic cafés). Most Islamic cafés can be found in the *čaršija*, the old Ottoman quarter. The area is one of Sarajevo's biggest tourist attractions, which means its mosques serve both as spaces of worship and as tourist sites. The area's many souvenir shops are interspersed with Islamic bookshops and hijab boutiques, and Islamic cafés cater to believers as well as visitors looking for a "slice of the Orient." Being centrally located, some of *čaršija*'s Islamic cafés attract other locals who might just be looking for a caffeine kick or a nice piece of baklava. Additionally, the *čaršija* hosts several venues targeting a secular crowd, such as one well-known bar specializing in a variety of domestic spirits called *rakija*.

So how does a pious young Muslim navigate this maze of overlapping spaces? The foremost marker of an Islamic café is that it does not serve alcohol. These cafés also often play modern interpretations of *ilahijas* and *kasidas*, religious Muslim songs exalting God and dedicated to other religious subjects, respectively. Guests and staff in Islamic cafés greet each other with *selam alejkum* and part saying *Allah emanet*, a phrase meaning "entrusted to God." This serves to mark these spaces as belonging to the faith community. It is perhaps important to note that they do not use other traditional greetings such as *merhaba* (hello), *sabah hajrola* (good morning), and *akšam hajrola* (good evening). Such phrases of Turkish origin used to mark certain urban and rural spaces as Muslim, but they do not have religious significance (Sorabji 1994, 112; Bringa 1995, 56). In her study of what she terms conventional and pious Muslim women in Bosnia, Ibrahimpašić writes about these cafés as *halal* (allowed) spaces, where women "could relax and enjoy being in public without worrying about committing haram" (2012, 277). She describes them as "saturated in Islamic symbols of the moon and the star, Arabic script, and Middle-Eastern décor or what many Bosnians referred to as 'Oriental' in the colonial/Saidian understanding" (2012,

277). Although outward appearance contributes to the Islamic feel of these spaces, I argue that their inhabiting by believers in accordance with Islamic moral principles is more important for creating and maintaining their halal nature. What makes a café an Islamic space is above all its continuous inhabiting by practicing believers who engage with each other, in a morally correct manner. This may not be discussed explicitly with much frequency, but it can be elicited from believers' behavior and, perhaps even more importantly, their reactions to others' behavior.

People transform space through mundane everyday practices (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). That is why transgressions of the unspoken rules underpinning the interactions within Islamic spaces are considered to be so problematic, even if they are often committed unwittingly by people from outside the faith community. If a guest greets a waiter with a secular greeting such as *dobar dan* (good day), the waiting staff or other guests might start exchanging meaningful looks or even mimic the greeting sarcastically once the transgressor is out of earshot. Some of my interlocutors complained about inappropriate interactions between men and women they observed in some of these cafés, particularly when it came to physical contact. Others complained about the increasing number of cafés in the *čarsija* that did not serve alcohol but have started introducing *nargile* (Turkish water pipes).[9] These comments, coupled with the fact that some cafés frequented by believers did not have a traditional Muslim appearance, highlight that it is primarily the moral inhabiting of a space that makes it Islamic in the eyes of believers.

Gendered interaction among pious Muslims

The nature of interaction between men and women is central to the Islamic character of a space. At organized mixed-gender events, men and women are asked to sit in different parts of the room, either at the front and back or, more commonly, to the left and right of the room. Newcomers to the scene often unwittingly disrupt this order, but at the same time, such events serve to introduce them to the rules of interaction between men and women expected of believers. Although spatial separation of this kind does not exist in Islamic cafés (there are no specified men's and women's sections), staff and customers are expected to observe gendered rules of interaction understood as prescribed by Islam. A café in one of Sarajevo's socialist era suburban neighborhoods, one of the few Islamic cafés located outside of the *čaršija*, even featured "no kissing" signs on the tables. Although it is uncommon to make it this explicit, unspoken rules on appropriate gendered interaction make it acceptable for young believers to visit these spaces in single or mixed-gender groups and even as unmarried couples.

Socializing in mixed-gender groups of young people is governed by similar rules of interaction. This generally involves no physical contact between unrelated men and women, and preferably some degree of spatial separation. When seated around a table, men and women often sit on opposite sides in an attempt to maintain an element of gender distance. Exactly how these rules should translate into practice is contested by believers on a daily basis, especially since these practices are relatively new to many of them and are not observed by mainstream society. Handshaking is an example of a practice that is considered surprisingly controversial (cf. Ibrahimpašić 2012, 282–284). A handshake is a common greeting in Bosnia, and many Bosnians, whether Muslim or not, are not aware that believers avoid it on religious grounds. As it constitutes physical contact, most believers consider it not to be in accordance with Islam. Some believers, both men and women, consistently refuse to shake hands with the opposite gender, something

which can cause confusion and offense among people whose offered handshake goes unanswered. Others negotiate their Islamic beliefs and local conventions of comportment dependent upon context, and so they decide when to accept a handshake and when to decline it. Their decisions regarding with whom to shake hands suggest that the practice of handshaking (or rather its avoidance) delineates the boundaries of the faith community. This is clear from Azra's account:

> When I'm in contact with people who don't have anything to do with religion, I mean, who can't know about this rule, I shake hands without any [reservations]. And then, later in the conversation, I explain to them how it works. Of course, in a polite way, so I don't offend them. Because imagine that as a person who wasn't raised in the spirit of faith, in this cultural context, you offer your hand to someone who is ignoring you for reasons known to them but not to the person doing it [extending their hand].

An event related to me by Emina, a 21-year-old student, whose quote on Sharia dating introduced this paper, illuminates this further. When first starting her studies at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, she was surprised by the behavior of some of her fellow male students who would extend their hand to her in offer of a handshake. Surprised by their behavior, she responded: "How can you reach out your hand to me? I'm your sister, you can't shake my hand." Pious Muslims often refer to each other as brothers and sisters, thus strengthening the imagined community of believers. Therefore, it is not insignificant that Emina rebuffed the offer of a handshake by her fellow believers not by saying she cannot shake hands with them because she is a woman, but because she is their sister. Their conduct did not disrupt what is expected behavior between men and women; it disrupted what is expected behavior between pious men and women, between brothers and sisters in the faith.

Bendixsen found that handshaking plays a similar role in delineating a faith community among Muslim youth in Berlin. She observed that some pious women did not shake hands with fellow pious Muslims, but they did shake hands with non-Muslim classmates at school. She explains this as "moving between different social fields, where different role performances are emphasized or considered the correct practice" as well as "an effort to not alienate non-Muslims from Islam" (Bendixsen 2013, 231–232). Although she describes women's interactions only with non-Muslims, while my interlocutors applied selective handshaking to both non-Muslims and nominal Muslims who were not seen as part of the faith community,[10] both practices are underpinned by a similar understanding of the existence of different rules of gendered interaction with outsiders and insiders to the community. Furthermore, Bendixsen suggests that it might be less essential to maintain the religious gender order when interacting with men who are not considered potential marriage partners (2013, 231–232). Bearing in mind that pious Muslim women aspire to marry a man who is a believer and not only a nominal Muslim, the pool of potential marriage partners effectively narrows to men within the faith community.

Dating and marriage: contested definitions of Islamic relationships

Men and women aspire to marriage and see it as a religious duty. A morally sound (nuclear) family is often referred to as a *zdrava porodica*, a healthy family. It is considered essential to creating a moral — and healthy — society and for raising morally upright individuals who will engage in this society. Marriage is also valued as a partnership between a man and a woman. Believers consider partners in an Islamic marriage to have more trust in each other because they know they have to answer to God. Although divorce is not uncommon and possibly less stigmatized among pious Muslims than mainstream Bosnian

society,[11] marital breakdown is often attributed to one or both of the marriage partners not being mindful enough in their practice of religion. This leaves the ideal of Islamic marriage intact.

Partner-seeking strategies among young Muslims are shaped by sanctioned forms of interaction between men and women. Spaces of Islamic sociability such as youth gatherings in mosques, Islam-related talks organized through civil society organizations, and Islamic cafés all play an important role in enabling young people to meet a suitable partner (cf. Bendixsen 2013, 234–239). Nedžada's testimony above about a mosque-affiliated youth gathering she attended with a group of her female friends recognized how important socializing is to young believers who frequent Islamic spaces. Later in the same conversation, her words also made it clear how significant they are in perusing the potential partner pool: "Lately we haven't been coming as much as before. You know, for a while we were also coming because each of us had our eye on one of the guys."

Sharia dating: between partner compatibility and cultural accommodation

Compatibility between partners is considered crucial in establishing a successful match. In order to ascertain compatibility, or because they do not yet feel ready for marriage, many believers have premarital relationships that adhere to their understanding of Islamic rules of gendered interaction. Pious Muslims in Sarajevo refer to these as Islamic relationships or, more commonly, as *šerijatske veze* (Sharia relationships) or *šerijatsko zabavljanje* (Sharia dating) (cf. Ibrahimpašić 2012, 284–294). Mainstream Bosnian society is relatively unfamiliar with this practice and the terms used to describe it. Many Sarajevans I spoke to who were not in contact with pious Muslims were not aware of Sharia dating or were at least unfamiliar with the rules that govern it. The very mention of Sharia in the context of relationships and marriage makes many uncomfortable, as they associate it with polygamy.[12] For those in the faith community, designating a relationship as Sharia means that it follows the rules on gendered interaction that those engaging in the practice believe are sanctioned by Sharia. It does not imply introducing Sharia legislation, nor does it refer to couples who have undergone a religious marriage ceremony (referred to as Sharia wedding) but forgone a civil one.

Believers might have slightly differing views on what constitutes a Sharia relationship, but the key rule is to avoid any kind of physical contact. Dates are generally not chaperoned, but couples meet in public spaces. This way they are technically not meeting alone, as they are always in public view. Sharia relationships are meant to enable young people to establish partner compatibility and ideally should result in marriage. Many women stress that having the opportunity to get to know your partner before marriage will lead to a more stable union. In practice, it is not unusual for couples to break up and move on to find new partners with whom they might be more compatible. This does not result in damaged reputations because of the Islamic nature of the premarital relationship.

Many believers explain the practice of Sharia dating as a result of Bosnia's unique geographic and cultural location. Some of my interlocutors compared Sharia dating to *ašikovanje*, a traditional courtship practice considered unique to Bosnia within the Ottoman Empire, in which a suitor would communicate with a potential bride through a lattice window (cf. Ibrahimpašić 2012, 284–294). Dating is often constructed as specifically Bosnian by contrasting it with essentialised understandings of Arab marriage practices. Senada, 26 years of age at the time of our conversation, met her future husband through a friend when she was in high school. They dated for six years before marrying. Although she understood her engagement with Islam as distinct from traditional forms of Islamic

practice in Bosnia, she stressed the embeddedness of Sharia dating in the Bosnian cultural context:

> We are sort of the most specific out of all Muslim countries, out of all Muslim societies. There [in the Middle East] they … it's culture, it's tradition, I don't know, they marry some sort of family members, arranged marriages and all that. That doesn't exist here. … For us, maybe not just for Bosnia-Herzegovina, maybe for this region of former Yugoslavia, what's characteristic is that, I don't know, you meet for coffee, you have a coffee, you go to the cinema, you go for a walk, a stroll. How can I put it? Anything that's outside, anything that I could do with you. I mean, you say hello … There's just no physical contact, there's no kissing.

Some of my interlocutors who engaged in Sharia relationships conceded that Islam does not allow for dating. Yet they believed their only way of meeting a future husband in a secular society like Bosnia, where dating is a normative practice, was to go on dates. What they could do was ensure that these dating practices did not break the most basic of rules regarding unrelated men and women in Islam, namely, physical touch. Sharia dating practices, therefore, reveal an accommodationist approach similar to that of women's choice to shake hands selectively. By finding a middle ground between Islamic rules on gendered interaction and local cultural expectations, they have created a practice that allows them to reconcile their religious beliefs with living in modern-day Bosnia.

Alternative forms of finding a marriage partner

Not all pious Muslims accept Sharia relationships to be an Islamic practice. Believers influenced by Salafism consider dating to be forbidden in Islam, even if they do not always follow all other Salafi practices. They also dispute the Islamic nature of mixed-gender socializing in spaces such as Islamic cafés, although some of them did engage in this in their past. Pious women who avoid dating in general find their partners through word of mouth and often only meet with them a handful of times before deciding to marry. This is criticized by secular Bosnians—as well as many pious Muslims—as a backward and culturally foreign practice. It is often conflated with the concepts of arranged or even forced marriages thought to be characteristic of an essentialized "Arab" culture (cf. Mesarič 2013).

Far from passively waiting for a suitor, pious women who disagree with premarital relationships still actively engage in finding a partner, most often through friends or communities of believers attached to particular spaces of Islamic worship or sociability. Some also rely on Internet matchmaking services specifically catering to pious Muslims. Some meet with a potential partner in the presence of a friend or relative with the explicit purpose of discussing marriage. Others meet in a setting resembling a Sharia date, but would not allow this to develop into a prolonged courting relationship. Mirela, who met her future husband through a friend, started growing impatient with him soon after:

> We had already met up three times and he still hadn't mentioned marriage. Then I thought to myself, if he still doesn't say anything next time we meet up, I'm going to bring it up myself. Well, and that was the time he asked me if I wanted to marry him.

When Mirela and her husband met, they had both been "in the faith" for two years and had a similar depth of knowledge of Islam. She believed their similar experiences of engaging with Islam would make it easier for them to relate to each other. Women who do not support premarital relationships put just as much emphasis on partner compatibility as those believers who engage in the practice of Sharia dating.

Pious women who I came to know, regardless of the Islamic discourses and practices they drew from, often had friends and, most frequently, family members with very different

views on life and Islam from their own. This did not seem to cause many problems for most of them. However, when looking for a marriage partner, one's worldview and particularly one's understanding of how to practice Islam are of paramount importance. Women are looking for a partner with whom they have a compatible personality and whose values are similar to theirs. Primarily, they are looking for someone who is a pious Muslim. Because they prioritize finding partners within the faith community, which overlaps but is not identical to the Bosniak ethno-national community, some marry foreign Muslim partners, local converts, or local Muslims of mixed-ethnic background. This reflects the shift toward universal Islam in contradistinction with traditional Muslim practices, and this can meet with parental disapproval (cf. Bendixsen 2013, 236–238). Women are not only looking for a partner who is a believer, but also one who has similar views on how Islam should inform their everyday lives, including things such as women's dress, employment, and raising children. The emphasis on choosing one's partner based on how their understanding of Islam compares to one's own indicates the existence of differences in Islamic practice in Bosnia. Yet, this does not point to incommensurable differences between different groups of pious Muslims, but rather highlights their underlying similarities. Although some of their everyday practices may differ, they have a shared understanding of Islamic marriage as a partnership built on trust, the stability of which is supported not only by observance of religion, but also by partner compatibility.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to highlight some of the aspects of the resurgence of Islam in Bosnia that have so far been given limited attention. In order to explain how the social and dating life of young pious Muslims is shaped by their religious beliefs, the faith community they belong to, and the wider societal context, it first addressed the nature of the contemporary Islamic revival in Bosnia. It argued that observing pious Muslims as a moral community of believers that overlaps with, but is distinct from, the ethno-national Bosniak community is essential in understanding the life choices and practices of pious Muslims. This moral community serves to protect practicing Muslims from the disintegration of social relationships seen to characterize post-war Bosnian society and provide a source of supportive interpersonal relationships.

The Muslim faith community is associated with particular spaces, not only places of worship such as mosques and tekkes, but also including religious civil society organizations and a significant number of hospitality establishments located primarily in the old Ottoman quarter. Believed to operate in accordance with Islamic moral principles and hence referred to as Islamic cafés, these cafés are just as important in marking the area as an Islamic space as mosques are. All of these spaces play an important role in creating opportunities for young people to expand their social networks and make friends with peers who share their Islamic beliefs and values. They also play a central role in young people's efforts to find a partner, either by enabling them to meet potential partners at mixed-gender events or by gathering information from fellow believers. Even though one might associate places of worship with transmission of Islamic knowledge in contrast with Islamic cafés as social spaces where young couples can get to know each other, we should observe them as part of the same continuum. The opportunity to socialize with individuals, both of the same and the opposite gender, is a strong motivating factor for young people to attend religious gatherings and talks, including those taking place in mosques. On the other hand, when believers socialize informally in spaces such as Islamic cafés, Islam, and particularly how to live one's life as a believer, often becomes the topic of conversation and allows

young people to learn about Islamic practice from pious Muslim peers. As learning and socializing are so intertwined, spaces of Islamic sociability and learning likewise blend into each other.

Young pious Muslims observe certain rules of gendered interaction that are uncommon in mainstream Bosnian society, such as avoiding physical contact between unrelated men and women. At the same time, they recognize the limitations of attempting to live a pious life in a secular environment where some of their pious practices are perceived as unusual and culturally foreign. The paper compares different responses to this predicament, including a practice referred to by some believers as Sharia dating, a form of premarital relationship that avoids any physical contact and is meant to establish compatibility of potential marriage partners. It argues that the forms of gendered interaction, partner-seeking strategies, and marital and premarital relationships common among pious Muslims can be observed as examples of localized Islamic practices, distinct from traditional Muslim gender roles and family structures in Bosnia (cf. Roy 2004, 141, 216–218; Mahmood 2005, 15; Bendixsen 2013). Even though the type of equality sought by the majority of pious Muslim women is based on the notion of gender complementarity, a system in which men and women are seen as essentially different and where motherhood is central to women's lives (cf. Ibrahimpašić 2012, 286–288), this does not mean that these women are attempting to revive traditional practices. Many of my interlocutors were critical of what they understood to be traditional gender roles in Bosnia. They noted that Bosnia and the Balkans are marked by gender inequality. They largely explained this with the same conceptual toolbox as their secular peers: peasant mentality, traditionalism, *nekulturnost* (lack of culture), and primitivism (cf. Helms 2008), something which one of my pious interlocutors described as "the Balkan peasant man syndrome." In contrast to mainstream views where this list of attributes includes religiosity, pious Muslims saw Islam as a way out of this condition. For them Islam, when properly understood and practiced, can cultivate the primitive Balkan man out of the darkness of oppressing women into a suitable marriage partner respectful of women (cf. Bendixsen 2013, 235).

The practice of Sharia dating is clearly influenced by the Bosnian cultural context. However, the societal expectations that normalize dating and find a complete absence of premarital relationships to be unusual are largely the consequence of the secular modernist project pursued by socialist Yugoslavia for much of the twentieth century. Although Sorabji (1989) noted a similar form of dating practiced among a small number of pious Muslim youth in Sarajevo in the 1980s, this shows that the Islamic revival predates the breakup of Yugoslavia and not that the youth of today are returning to traditional practices. Young pious Muslims look for potential partners within the faith community, not within the ethnic community as would have traditionally been the norm. Although both communities overlap to an extent, they are not identical, and young pious Muslims' views on acceptable marriage partners can differ greatly from those of their parents (provided they have not turned to piety themselves). While ways of finding a marriage partner common among Muslims influenced by Salafism seem more conservative, they also cannot be explained as a simple return to tradition, whether Bosnian or Arab. Partnership between husband and wife is central to how pious Muslims conceive of Islamic marriage. Believers create a Sharia microcosm within nuclear families (themselves characteristic of modernity) built on a trusting partnership between individuals entering into the marriage bond. This reflects the individualized nature of modern forms of religiosity, where living in accordance with Sharia does not involve changing the law or the political system, but rather transforming oneself.

Funding

This work was supported by the Slovenian Research Agency through the Young Researchers program.

Notes

1. Names have been replaced with pseudonyms.
2. The term Bosniak was introduced as the official name for Bosnia's Muslim population in 1993 (Hećimović 2008, 187–188; Larise 2015, 203–204). In contrast to Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Montenegrins who held the status of "constitutive nations" since the establishment of socialist Yugoslavia, Muslims did not achieve constitutive status until 1968 and were encouraged to declare themselves as Serbs or Croats (Bringa 1995, 27–29; Larise 2015, 199–201; Merdjanova 2016, 36).
3. *Madrasas* in Bosnia are equivalent to high schools. Although they offer religious education, much of their curriculum is secular. There are six such *madrasas* in Bosnia, all under the authority of the official Islamic Community.
4. The number of Salafi organizations in Bosnia linked to Arab governments or transnational networks has declined after government closures and other pressures following 9/11 (Moe 2009b, 153–155; Li 2010). Turkey's influence has grown in recent decades, although not to the same extent as in other Balkan countries with Muslim populations (Solberg 2007, 2009; Merdjanova 2016, 76–81; see also Zadrożna 2017). Iranian influence is also present in Bosnia through religious and cultural initiatives.
5. There are a significant number of pious women who do not wear hijab in their daily lives, mainly citing practical obstacles and fear of discrimination. For more on Muslim women's dress practices in Sarajevo, see Mesarič (2013).
6. "Covered" (*pokrivena*) is the most common way of referring to a woman who wears the hijab.
7. It is interesting to note that a number of my interlocutors, regardless of whether they had a Bosniak, non-Bosniak, or mixed family background, found their way to Islam after a period of exploring Christianity, Buddhism, or the Hare Krishna movement.
8. There is a broader scope of interpretation of the strict rules followed by Salafis than commonly thought. Based on my observations at a Salafi women's Quranic school and the subsequent conversations with the women I met there, particular aspects of religious practice are often the subject of debate. Salafis also differ in their views on the Bosnian Muslim mainstream and established Islamic authorities (Hećimović 2008, 198–202; Moe 2009b, 94–95).
9. My interlocutors disagreed about whether smoking is permitted in Islam, but pious women who smoked often avoided doing so in public.
10. Elsewhere in her analysis, Bendixsen does describe how women distinguish between pious and nominal Muslims and explores how this impacts their marriage practices (2013, 232–234).
11. Although Islam allows for divorce, it was not common practice in Bosnia. A new generation of pious Muslims who turn to Islamic scripture for guidance are more likely to be accepting of the practice.
12. Polygamous marriages are practiced by some Salafis in Bosnia, but they are extremely rare and are not sanctioned by the official Islamic Community.

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