Ethnologies

"We Speak English"
Language and Identity Processes in Northern Ireland's Muslim Community

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Article abstract

Language is an important identity marker and is often a symbol of immigrants' resistance to assimilation within the host societies. Indeed, by speaking their own languages, immigrants in Europe develop their transnational identities and set up defensive boundaries against possible cultural homogenisations. This is particularly relevant for Muslim immigrants, since Arabic is both an identity and a religious symbol. In many European mosques, Muslims consider Arabic as the only acceptable language. In particular the *khutbat* [Friday sermon] should be written and read in Arabic. In contrast, Muslims in Northern Ireland, who have developed their *ummah* [community of believers] in the only mosque and cultural centre they have (located in the Northern Ireland's capital, Belfast), have selected English as their main community language. In this article, the author analyzes the reasons that have brought this Muslim community to use English as a complex metaphor of their peculiar social-cultural position within Northern Irish society.

"We Speak English"

Language and Identity Processes in Northern Ireland's Muslim Community

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Language is one of the most complex and fascinating human skills, from physical, cognitive, and social-cultural viewpoints (Taylor 1991). Yet anthropologists studying Muslim communities in Europe tend only to deal with effects of bilingualism on second generations (De Ruiter and Obdeijn 1998). Indeed, many scholars take for granted that in European mosques immigrants speak Arabic or their local languages among themselves, and use the host country's language to communicate with local people (Strijp 1998b). The lack of studies dedicated to this topic highlights the need to focus on the cultural significance that language changes have in European Muslim communities (Giles 1977).

De Rutier observes, however, that the lack of studies could be explained by the fact that "[t]he world of the mosques in Europe is not an easy one to approach" (1998a: 28). Nevertheless, Muslims in Northern Ireland have welcomed my research and helped me to understand their lives. This has allowed me to observe many aspects of this community, including the prevalence of English within it.

Language is more than a medium of communication. It often becomes a symbol of membership in and belonging to a group or (as in the case of Arabic) to a religion (Saint-Jacques and Giles 1979). However, as Dorais (1988) emphasizes, languages are not abstract objects but are linked to political and economic situations. He observes that in the case of Canadian Inuit, a development of the *inuktituty* [Inuit identity] would be possible only through political autonomy and independent management of economic resources.

During my fieldwork[1], I studied the Muslim presence in Northern Ireland. I learned how their use of language sheds light on the complex social-political position of this Muslim community, in which the predominance of English deeply contrasts with other European Muslim communities. In this article, I shall investigate why Muslims in Northern Ireland prefer to speak English instead of, as in other mosques, standard or "classical" Arabic.[2]

In the first section, I will outline the history of the Northern Irish Muslim community, which is closely linked to the development of the Northern Irish "Troubles". As I will explain, Muslims started to form and organize their community during a time of considerable sectarian tension and violence in Northern Ireland. In the second section, I shall explain the Islamic concept of *ummah* (plural *ummam*) [community], which has an important philosophical and theological meaning to Muslims (although, during the modern era, the nationalist attitudes of the so-called Islamic states has weakened its political relevance).

Muslim immigrants have renewed the concept of *ummah* and perceived a symbol of unity in the Arabic language of Qur'an. This has led many European imams to develop a preference for Arabic in the mosques' everyday life, as I have observed, for example, in Italy, France, and England. In the third section of this paper, I will report some examples of this attitude in Pisa, where standard Arabic has been used. In addition, the fact that children of Muslim immigrants tend to integrate Arabic words into their slang may stress further the symbolic importance that Arabic has for Muslim living in Europe.

Surprisingly, this is not what is found in Belfast, where Muslims privilege English. In the last part of this paper, I will try to answer the questions arising from such a discrepancy through the analysis of the cultural and social position that the Muslim community has in Northern Ireland.

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1. This article is based on two years of fieldwork and ethnographic study of Muslims in Northern Ireland. I have used pseudonyms to protect the identity of my informants. My thanks also go to the Belfast Islamic Centre and mosque for their support. I would like to thank George Fulford, Penelope Pollard and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive and insightful comments.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, throughout this essay I will use the term "Arabic" to refer to "classical" Arabic (i.e. the language of the Qur'an).

Muslims in Northern Ireland

Ongoing sectarian tensions and struggles between the Catholic and Protestant communities, culminating in more than thirty years of terrorism, have marked Northern Ireland's recent history. Despite these "troubles", Northern Ireland and its capital, Belfast, have seen an increase in immigration, which has challenged the established Christian cultural homogeneity.

"People decide to live here, it's not something that happens by chance; they have something to do here", the imam of the Belfast Islamic Centre told me in his Malaysian-English accent. Indeed, different phases of immigration have formed the local Muslim community. The majority of its members have spent months or years of their lives in England, Scotland, or the Republic of Ireland before moving to Northern Ireland.

To know that there is a Muslim community within the "troubled" Christian Northern Irish society may seem surprising. I was even more surprised when the President of the mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre, Jamal, told me that Muslims in Northern Ireland might have reached 4,000 members (2,000 of whom are registered with the mosque). In fact, at the beginning of my research in Northern Ireland, a personal communication from the Northern Irish Statistic and Research Agency indicated that only 997 Muslims were living in Northern Ireland. Since the 1991 Census had not included any question directly related to religion, the size of the Muslim population was based on the personal estimate of the Northern Irish Statistic and Research officers. In the 2001 Census a specific question concerning religious affiliation was included (but it was not compulsory to answer). Based on response to this question, 1,943 individuals identified themselves as Muslims, making this the largest non-Christian community in the region.

Through many interviews, I have tried to record the history of the Northern Ireland Muslim community. This is to my knowledge the first published history of this community. Based on informal interviews, I learned that Muslims began living in Northern Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century, when some people working for the East India Company decided to settle near Ballymena. They were Indian Muslims who had lived in England and decided to move to Ireland, and then Northern Ireland, to establish family businesses. My informants said

these first Muslim immigrants considered Northern Ireland less expensive than England.

The first Muslim immigrants to Northern Ireland did not try to organise an *ummah* by building mosques or setting up prayer rooms. For a long time they saw their migration to Northern Ireland as temporary. Their goal was eventually to move back to Great Britain. For this reason, many Muslims kept strong linkages with family members living in English cities. However, these contacts actually stimulated further immigration instead of a return, because of the opportunity Northern Ireland's economy gave them.

The Muslims within the Northern Irish towns and cities became an active and productive community although they had not organised themselves religiously or politically. They tried not to be involved in the political turmoil that was affecting the Protestant and Catholic communities, but to maintain relationships with both. During the 1950s, an increase of immigrants and refugees (but also students attracted by The Queen's University) made the Muslim presence in Northern Ireland increasingly noticeable, with many Arab Muslims adding to the consistent presence of Muslims from Southern Asia.

Hussein, a sixty-five year old Indian man, alongside other elder members of the community, told me how, in 1953, some Muslims in Belfast celebrated the *Eid-al-Fitr*[3] in a flat located near the so-called University area, in the southern part of Belfast. This was the first time, he said, that Muslims in Belfast showed an interest in communally celebrating the most important Islamic feast. I think that this should be linked to the political and sectarian tensions which were rising within the region. The tensions resulted in the so-called Irish Republican Army (IRA) "border campaign" and, a few years later, in violent terrorist activities between the paramilitary factions. It is interesting to note that Muslims in Northern Ireland, for the first time, felt the need of a community to provide them with a special and different status from that of Northern Irish Roman Catholics and Protestants.

During my interviews, Hussein and Nasser (who is a Syrian man who has spent twenty-five years in Belfast holding an important office in the Muslim community) wanted to stress the important decision

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3.   One of the most important feasts in Islam, the *Eid-al-Fitr* celebrates the end of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, in which Muslims fast from dawn to sunset.

that Muslims made in 1985. They bought a detached house and converted it into the so-called Islamic Cultural Centre, in which the mosque is also located. This is the only recognised official mosque and cultural centre serving all Muslims living in Northern Ireland.

The Islamic Cultural Centre and its mosque have become the symbol of Northern Irish *ummah* unity. Shi'a and Sunni (from several countries), Arab and Pakistani, Indonesian and Malaysian, Moroccan and Algerian, Indian and Afghan Muslims are sharing (in contrast to other European situations) the same mosque and social-political space. Hence, Muslims in Northern Ireland show some important differences in comparison to other better-studied Muslim communities in Great Britain and Europe (see for instance Werbner 2002; Nonneman et al. 1997; Lewis 1994; Nielsen 1988, 1995).

Muslims in Europe, as Werbner (2002) shows, tend to split into subgroups and factions. They often organize mosques and cultural centres based on ethnic and national groups in competition and opposition with each other. In cities such as London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Paris, and Rome, Islamic movements and groups diverge so deeply from each other that the definition of "community" would be hardly acceptable (see Nonneman et al. 1997; Lewis 1994; Nielsen 1988, 1995). But, as we have seen, this is not the case in Northern Ireland, where Muslims, despite their cultural and ethnic differences, want to remain an undivided *ummah.*

The Islamic Concept of *Ummah*

Ummah is one of the most important concepts in Islam and has its root in the Arabic word *umm* meaning "mother" or "source". The Qur'an and *Hadiths*[4] mention this term several times, sometimes with different meanings. Nevertheless, as Asad stresses, its basic definition is "a group of living beings having certain characteristics or circumstances in common" (1980: 177). This concept is not restricted to human beings (Sura 6: 38) because "each individual species is an *ummah*, originating from a single source (*umm*). [Yet] Man is the only species within which more than one *ummah* exists" (Al-Ahsan 1992: 12).

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4. *Hadith* means "speech", "report", and "narrative", but in Islamic teaching has the sense of tradition. In other words, what the Prophet Muhammad and his companions said and did.

Actually, *ummah* is not the only term that the Qur'an uses to define a community. In Sura [43: 23], we find the word *qaryah* [community]. What is the distinction between the two terms? *Ummah* is more specific than *qaryah*; the former deals with the idea of "believers", whereas the later does not (Al-Ahsan 1992: 15). *Ummah* incorporates the concept of Muslim (i.e. a person who surrenders his/her desire to the will of Allah).

Migration, diaspora, and displacement have had a strong impact on Muslims who for different reasons had to leave their homes — often to flee dictatorships or extreme economic hardships. In the host Western countries, they are often unable to reconstruct the networks of relatives and friends which they had formed in their homelands, which are particularly important to the social lives of women. Furthermore, Muslim immigrants' experience of unemployment, racism, discrimination, and (recently) islamophobia has affected their confidence in a "liberal" Europe (see Kepel 1997; AlSayyad and Castells 2001; Haddad 2002).

In this environment, religious identity becomes an essential part of Muslim immigrants' lives in the host country. Frequent visits to the local mosques and, above all, participation in the *jumuah* [Friday prayers] are often the only occasions in which Muslims are able to meet other Muslims in their regions. Within mosques and prayer rooms, Muslims have to accept the existence of different Islamic traditions and to reconstruct the *ummah* from an Islamic, rather than a national or ethnic, viewpoint. Hence, many Muslims have rediscovered the "practical side" of *ummah* through the hardship and displacement that the act of migration involves.

Although they come from different countries, which may even be hostile to each other, Muslim immigrants often feel part of "one family". Arabic, the language of the Qu'ran, provides the symbolic, although utopian, unity. Arabic is the language in which the Qur'an was revealed, and Muslims who do not speak it have to learn the few verses that they need to perform their daily prayer. For these reasons, in many European Mosques there is a strong pressure to use Arabic instead of other languages, and in particular instead of the languages of the European host countries.

Speaking Arabic

The following is an extract from the fieldnotes that I collected in Pisa (Italy) in 1999:

> I am scouring the narrow black alley looking for the mosque. On my right, there is a big wall, on my left a sequence of coloured doors. At the end of the alley, I can see a group of people speaking Arabic; it is a Maghrebian dialect. There is a friend of mine and he welcomes and introduces me to the others. They are eager to show me their mosque, which seems more a prayer room. We go beyond a green door, embellished with some verses from the Qur'an shaped in traditional calligraphic style.

> We give our "salaams" and the Maghrebians try to shift from their dialect to a more official standard Arabic. In the small room, there are not only Arabs (from different countries such as Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq) but also people from Turkey, Iran, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Italy.

> They sit around a man who is intent to comment on some verses from the Qur'an. I sit with them. He speaks an excellent Arabic. I know that many people cannot understand it; even some Maghrebians may have some problems with it. The religious function goes on in Arabic, not one word in Italian is heard.

> At the end Nasim, who is the responsible for the prayer room, invites me to stay and enjoy the dinner with them. During the dinner, they keep on speaking the same kind of Arabic. Somebody, for few minutes speaks to me in Italian, then starts again speaking in Arabic to the person on his right.

> I decide to ask Nasim why they keep on speaking Arabic although there are some people who, of course, could not understand it, or at least could not understand standard Arabic very well. Nasim answers, "Arabic is the language of Allah, the Qur'an is written in Arabic and is Allah's words. People can learn Arabic, but even if they do not understand it, Allah's words are going to touch their hearts. Arabic is the only language acceptable in any mosque."

During my visits to other mosques, in Italy, France, England and Southern Ireland, I observed that Arabic is the main language people speak there. In the case of mosques, with a majority of members coming from non-Arabic speaking countries, Muslims often organise Arabic classes that are attended by many Muslims willing to learn the language

of the Qur'an. Indeed, classical Arabic is considered a superior language, and a considerable distinction is made between it and Arabic dialects (Strijp 1998b).

Furthermore, in France, although second-generation Algerians have often only a limited knowledge of Arabic, they try to integrate it into their slang, and many of them even attend classes to learn it. There is a "collective awareness" among European Muslims about the centrality of Arabic as a medium of resistance against the pressure to assimilate into the host societies and it is a way to maintain a sense of unity and identity (Khellil 1991). Indeed, language is one of the most powerful symbols of unity and integration. The use of Arabic, as the only acceptable language within European Muslim communities, highlights the division between the *dar-al-islam* [the house of Islam], the *dar-al-Harb* [the house of war] (such as the non-Muslim contexts and countries).

In reality, Arabic permits immigrant Muslims to relocate themselves within *dar-al-islam*, although living, geographically, in *dar-al-Harb*. The issue may seem only a matter of philosophical definitions. Yet the Islamic debate about the status of Muslims living in non-Muslim countries makes the issue of mastering Arabic feeling a matter of personal honour (see Ismail 2000; Kepel 1997). For instance, in Pisa I was told:

> We are in a non-Muslim country. We can see a lot of wrong things and temptations, but we have our religion, our *Shari'a* [Islamic law] and, most important, our language, which is Allah's language. So we keep our Muslim identity as our brothers living in Islamic countries do. You know, some people think that if you do not live in an Islamic country you become westernised; you lose your *din* [faith]. But we are teaching our children to read the Qur'an, to pray and speak Arabic. So… it doesn't matter where you live if you keep your *din* and language.

In Pisa Arabic is promoted and taught, and parents tend to address their children using it. Mosques pay attention to the second-generation religious life. Arabic, through the memorization of the Qur'an, seems a valid medium to maintain a link with the first generation. Yet, De Ruiter argues, "[m]osque education does not significantly contribute to proficiency in Arabic. This seems to be caused by the conservative methods applied. Reciting the Koran by heart does not imply that one is fluent in Arabic" (1998: 28).

"Why are you speaking Arabic now?"

The following excerpt from my fieldnotes demonstrates some of the differences in language use in Belfast's mosque compared to the mosque in Pisa (as well as other European mosques).

> It is Sunday and, as usual, I am going to attend the Islamic School organized by the Belfast Islamic Centre for their children. It is a lovely day, and I can see the parents chatting in small groups, outside the mosque. I stop near three Iraqi friends of mine; they are speaking in English about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Although they know that I can understand Arabic, the discussion goes on in English, as, apparently, it was started.
>
> We are now involved in a heated conversation which particularly overwhelms Bakr who suddenly starts speaking Arabic. Immediately, one of his Iraqi friends asks him, "Why are you speaking Arabic now?"

Perhaps, if I had not had any previous contacts with other European mosques, this short conversation would not have attracted my attention. On the contrary, I was very surprised to observe three Iraqi men speaking English among themselves near the entrance of the mosque. Indeed, it was challenging my opinions and ideas about the role of Arabic language within Muslim communities in Europe. The friend's question "Why are you speaking Arabic now?" which sounded more a reproach than a comment, was begging explanation.

Being familiar with Northern Ireland's Muslim community, I have come to understand how, although it is not stated officially in the mosque, English seems the only acceptable language. Not only do Muslims in Northern Ireland converse in English, but English is also the language in which all official internal communication takes place. This deeply contrasts with patterns of language use in other European mosques. The following description taken from from Strijp (1998a: 29) pertains to a class in a mosque in Tiel (a Dutch provincial town), but it could equally apply to mosques in Amsterdam, Paris, Pisa, London and Dublin:

> The conversation then assumed a more serious note and the *imam* started his lesson. He focused on the proper performance of ritual duties and the memorization and accurate pronunciation of Arabic Koranic texts.

The situation described above does not apply to classes in the Belfast mosque. There, English plays a central role in communicative activities, as well as in religious ones. Although Islamic scholars state that the Friday *khutba* must be conducted in Arabic (De Ruiter 1998: 28), at the Belfast Mosque the sermon is in English, with only a few verses from the Qur'an read in Arabic (but translated immediately into English word by word). In Belfast, comments, teaching, and discussions concerning Islamic law, as well as the children's Islamic education, are also conducted strictly in English and not in classic or dialect Arabic. For instance, Strijp (1998b) notices that when classic Arabic was not used in these activities, Muslims in Dutch mosques shift to their dialect Arabic.

At a recent Annual General Meeting of the Belfast mosque and cultural centre, during which there was a heated discussion about recruiting teachers for the Children's Islamic School, an influential Muslim man stood up and said:

> I do not know what we want to do here. I do not think that [the applicants for the position] are the most suitable teachers for our children. I know that they have some knowledge about Islam and Islamic things but I'd like to ask… what about their English? It's poor!

Certainly, I would have thought that the main issue for the Belfast Islamic School would be to find teachers who were fluent in Arabic and with some knowledge in Islamic teaching. Instead parents' concern was about potential teachers speaking fluent English. To understand why Muslims in Northern Ireland were so concerned about this point, I conducted a series of unstructured and semi-structured interviews.

My analysis of the interviews I conducted on this topic suggests that the first generation of Muslim immigrants is particularly concerned about languages. On the one hand, they are concerned that languages other than English may cause misunderstanding within their Muslim community; on the other hand, they are also concerned about the effect that languages such as Urdu, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, and (in particular after September 11th) Arabic may have on Northern Irish people. For instance, in response to a question concerning the use of English in the mosque, Abdu-allah (a fifty-two year old Egyptian man) told me:

> Well… you now… there are so many people here [in the mosque], coming from different countries that if you speak Arabic with one of your fellows, other brothers may think that you are having some gossip about them.

Likewise, Farhan, a forty-five year old Pakistani man stated:

> It is better to be understandable within the mosque. I know that Arabic is the language of Islam, but at the same time we are living here… so… you know, we can use English as a common language, so that nobody is the most important.

A'ishah, a fifty-eight year old Syrian woman, clearly wanted to emphasize her fear of using Arabic:

> We don't have a Muslim neighbourhood, or a Pakistani, Arab neighbourhood and so on. We spend our life within the local society, so we use and have to use English. There are already problems with languages in this city, so why add a new one. We can teach Arabic to our children, and we do; yet they have to live here, their life is here and not in the country [homeland].

A'ishah clearly links the avoidance of Arabic in the public arena to the fact that Muslims in Northern Ireland, in contrast to Muslims living in England, do not have "their" neighbourhoods. In Belfast and Northern Ireland languages are important symbols of ethnicity and religion. She is aware of the Catholics' and Nationalists' struggle for the Irish language to be recognised as official in Northern Ireland. Yet she is also aware of the consequences this has caused (i.e. sectarian attacks and paramilitary violence).

Of course, the terrorist attacks of September 11th have not helped the Northern Irish Muslim community to use their holy language (Arabic). Ameen, a forty-eight year old Palestinian man alludes to this fact in his answer to the question "Why don't you speak Arabic in public?"

> What I could say, after twenty years that I am living here, is that English is a part of my identity. Even at home, I speak English to my wife. If a group of us spoke Arabic in a middle of a street, maybe in front of the mosque, what people would think? Guess!

It is not difficult to guess what they could think, as an incident that occurred in Ballymena, on the 26th of March, can illustrate. The *Ballymena Guardian* on Wednesday 27 March 2002 ran an article with the headline "D. U. P. Muslim snub row". The article explains how a DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) councillor had refused a gift from the Muslim community. The gift was a brass replica representing the Islamic designs and Arabic texts on the *Ka'bah*, in Mecca. The gift

according to the DUP councillor was in an incomprehensible language. Then he asked, "If a paramilitary group came to us with a gift or request for an exhibition would we accept it?"

Language and sectarianism are enmeshed in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Arabic words on the gift produced the sectarian reaction of the DUP councillor, who seems to have responded automatically to written Arabic (the incomprehensible, mysterious language) forgetting that he was speaking of Arabic, and not of Irish, of Muslims and not of a new dangerous paramilitary organisation. In the mind of the councillor, through a synecdochal process, Arabic became a new symbol of the Northern Irish "Troubles".

Second generation Muslims living in Northern Ireland share the concerns of second generation Muslims in Europe, who experience difficulties concerning language loss of their parents' mother tongues (see De Ruiter and Obdeijn 1998). They also share their parents' feelings that Arabic can be dangerous for them. Muhammad, who was born in Northern Ireland twenty-two years ago, told me:

> My parents sometimes speak in English; and I speak English with my brothers and sisters. It's our language. I have some Muslims in my classroom but we do not speak Arabic or use some Arabic words because people could think that we are saying something bad. People, in particular now, are suspicious about Arabic. So… why should we speak it if we know English?

As for their fathers and mothers, however, English is an important symbol of the unity of the Northern Irish *ummah*, as Khaddam, a nineteen year old Pakistani boy, highlights:

> In this mosque, we speak English. I remember that in London we had to speak Arabic, and because my Arabic is not very good, well it was difficult to say what you want. Then, there was a division between the Arabs and the others. Here, in Belfast, we are only one group, [it] doesn't matter which is your father's language or nationality, we are a real *ummah*.

Clearly, the Muslim community in Northern Ireland seems to be afraid to use standard Arabic (as well as their Arabic dialects and other mother tongues), whereas in other parts of Europe these languages are used in the mosques.

Language as Dangerous Symbol

Muslims in Northern Ireland have developed their *ummah* within the complex networks of geographic and social sectarian divisions characterizing this region. Although an unstable peace process is taking place, Northern Ireland is still a society characterized by sectarianism. Residents of Belfast have their "mental" map of the city according to the sectarian divisions of different neighbourhoods. Hence, most Protestants would not accept a job in a Catholic area, and most Catholics would refuse any offer from a Protestant employer.

Sectarianism is mainly based on stereotypes that help people to make imagined borders seem "real". Stereotypes are, in Northern Ireland, communicated through symbols (Buckley 1998), which become "social-synecdoches" that are "real" representations of the "Other" from the point of view of Protestant or Catholic in-groups. Any ethnic characteristic, symbol, famous person, flag, conflict, or even language, may be transformed into a sign of the hard confrontation between the two main Northern Irish communities (in particular among Northern Irish young people).

One morning, in July 2002, when I was crossing Lisburn Road (a mainly Protestant area), I was surprised to see that many Israeli flags had been substituted for the English flags which are normally attached to the street lamps. I decided to ask a friend of mine, who is a Loyalist, why they had changed the flags. He answered:

> You know that Palestinian suicide bombers are attacking Israel. Palestinians are terrorists like Nationalists and IRA. We are resisting against terrorism like the people of Israel. The history of Israel is our story; their problem is our problem; thus, the Israeli flag is our flag.

The same day I decided to walk in one of the Catholic neighbourhoods and discovered that the Nationalists had "decorated" their streets with Palestinian flags to show that the Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation was the symbol of the Nationalists' struggle against the British occupation. Hence, Muslims living in Belfast often face difficulties because their ethnic or national identities may be used to symbolize the Nationalist-Loyalist conflict. In other words Muslim ethnic, national and linguistic symbols are "symbolphaged" in order to actualise the "Troubles", as this anecdote from my fieldnotes illustrates:

> A Palestinian was crossing a road in a Loyalist area. Some thugs stopped him and asked, "What are you?" meaning "Catholic or Protestant?".When he answered "'Muslim", the guys asked, "Where are you from?" When he answered "Palestine", they attacked him.

Conclusion

Muslims in Northern Ireland have to live within the symbolic borders traced by both the Protestant and Catholic cultures. Yet Muslims want to live in both Catholic and Protestant areas without wishing to be assimilated. For this reason, they emphasize that they belong to the Islamic *ummah.* A sixty-two year old Pakistani woman told me the following story (recorded in my fieldnotes):

> We are Muslim… We live here, some of us since a long time now. We are Pakistani, North Irish, Palestinian, and from forty other countries. As Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, Indonesians, Tunisians, we may have different needs. As Muslims, we have the same necessities. Divided we may incur many problems; as *ummah*, we have many possibilities to resolve them. *Ummah* is an important word that goes far beyond the meaning of community. We are an *ummah* linked to others in the world and all together, we are brothers and sisters in Islam. Do you know what Islam means? Peace, security, and surrender to Allah. So, what we want is peace, security, and follow Allah's will.

However, none of my informants ever mentioned Arabic as the *ummah's* language. Instead, the *ummah*-Arabic relation shifts to that between *ummah* and English. Muslims in Belfast want to portray their community as "peaceful", "non-sectarian", and "open" to emphasize their distance from the Northern Irish "Troubles". At the same time, they want to emphasize their exclusive loyalty and commitment to Islam.

Although there are many tensions external to the Northern Irish Muslim community, there are some within it, too. In a community where people come from so many different nations and ethnic groups, with different Islamic traditions (e.g. Sunni and Shia), the members of this community are concerned about the effects that sectarianism would cause within their own community. Wishing to avoid becoming involved in the Nationalist-Loyalist dispute, the Muslim community in Northern Ireland seeks to "cancel" their ethnic identities by speaking English rather than Arabic (or even Arabic dialects and vernaculars such as Malaysian, Indonesian and Urdu). Thus, English becomes their symbol

of integration into a wider global community, while at the same time minimizing the risk of being stereotyped.

As De Ruiter and Obdeijn (1998), and other scholars, have observed, Muslims throughout Europe use Arabic to establish identities and religious communities committed to Islam. However, language has a different symbolism among Muslims in Northern Ireland. Ethnic, religious, and linguistic symbols have had a strong impact in the development of Northern Ireland's "Troubles", as Anthony Buckley (1998: 3) explains:

> The symbolic picture, the symbolic wall, the symbolic ship, the symbolic ring gain their meaning through having been set aside. Symbolic objects have been bracketed off from ordinary objects. They have been highlighted, elevated, put in quotation marks. And so we look at them as symbolic.

The Muslim community in Northern Ireland is aware that by using Arabic or Urdu as a principal identity marker, they would not become the "other other" of Northern Irish society but the "other" of each Christian group and faction. And to be the "other" of the Nationalist community or the "other" of the Loyalist one, would not allow them to establish a recognized, independent, islamic identity. Therefore, in Northern Ireland standard English is the language of the Muslim *ummah*. Standard English symbolises this community's resistance to negative stereotyping and "symbolphaging" by Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Loyalist communities. In using standard English (which thereby becomes a linguistic meta-category) they affirm their desire to be recognised as Muslims only, instead of Arabs, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and so on. By underlining their decision to use English as their community's language they want to affirm that the *ummah* is unrelated to Northern Irish sectarianism.

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