Religion as a coping mechanism for global labor

Lessons from the South Asian Shia Muslim diaspora in the US

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to analyze the manner in which an immigrant community (South Asian Shia Muslims) deploys religious institutions as a coping mechanism to survive in a demanding and culturally alien environment.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis is derived from an ethnographic examination of a community of South Asian Shia Muslims in the United States.

Findings – The paper focuses on three elements of organizational coping. First, communities struggle with the promises and perils of transnationalism. Second, the coming of age of children, whose life experiences do not involve dislocation, produce interesting generational engagements. Finally, the community is often challenged by the nuanced task of political engagement with the broader society.

Research implications – An in-depth focus on employment-related experiences of Shia Muslim diaspora in the West may be a fruitful area for future research.

Practical implications – Employers and governments ought to pay attention to internal heterogeneity of Muslims in understanding and managing diversity.

Originality/value – This is a seminar paper on Shia Muslim diaspora in the USA and relates the study to the realm of workplace diversity.

Keywords Shia Muslims, South Asian diaspora, Muslim diaspora, Religious diversity, Organizational coping, Religion, Asia, Immigrants, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

The role of religion in producing coping mechanisms among immigrant communities has been well documented (Stepick, 2005). From Fuzhuonese immigrants in Manhattan's legendary Chinatown (Guest, 2003) to Hindus in the suburbs of Pittsburgh (Rayaprol, 1997), and from the church-going children of Korean immigrants (Alumkal, 2001) to their Vietnamese-American counterparts (Bankston and Min, 1995), we have learned of the multiple ways in which immigrants creatively deploy religious institutions to negotiate a cultural space for themselves in the USA. Similar analyses abound with respect to immigrant religious communities in Europe and elsewhere as well (e.g. Foner and Alba, 2008). However, for many newly immigrant communities, the mechanisms of coping are mediated by several, often-competing pressures, which theorists of organizational diversity ignore at their peril.

In this paper, I attempt to analyze the role of religion in providing a coping mechanism for global labor. My analysis is based on a two-year ethnography conducted among the South Asian Shia Muslim community of New Jersey, USA (a longer analysis of these ideas is forthcoming in Mir and Hasan, 2013). Ethnography, with its emphasis on studying the situated nature of processes, was most suitable because it helped me to "preserve the identity of things and enfold them in larger worlds of sense at the same time" (Geertz, 2000, p. xi). In my case, as a person who

shared an ethnic heritage with the group under study, I was able to get unfettered access to its members, and engage them in an intimate manner. In effect, this study can be seen as an "autoethnography" (Holman Jones, 2005), where the boundary between researcher and informant is rendered non-existent.

In this paper, I focus on three elements of organizational coping. First, communities struggle with the promises and perils of transnationalism (Levitt, 2007). The broader identities they seek to appropriate are often derived from multiple points of origin, which are difficult to disentangle. Second, the coming of age of children, whose life experiences do not involve dislocation, produce interesting generational engagements, as the children of migrant workers engage with their adults (and their new-immigrant peers) in a dynamic that is fraught with the promise of synthesis as well as the peril of incommensurability (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Finally, the community is often challenged by the nuanced task of political engagement with the broader society, both in terms of carving a space for religious sovereignty and producing conditions of trust in an atmosphere where they may be viewed with suspicion (Leonard, 2002).

This discussion has tremendous consequences for theorists of global diversity, be it at the corporate level (Poster, 2008), or for theorists of workplace diversity in general (Ayala *et al.*, 2010; Flache and Macy, 2011). The current analysis of global diversity has often used high-tech, well-trained and affluent workers as their default models. The reality of the global workforce of course is far more heterogeneous. In his analysis of the relationship between globalization and labor, Ronaldo Munck (2002) had suggested that the new era of globalization represents a second "great transformation," in the same way Karl Polanyi (1957) had theorized the great transformation created by the industrial revolution. Munck had identified two elements of this transformation as they relate to labor. The first, "deterritorialization," is produced by the tendencies of capital to free itself from the constraints of geographic space. The second tendency created by globalization is "Brazilianization," or the spread of third world-like work patterns into the industrial north. More and more, we are seeing the emergence of a contingent labor economy in the industrialized rich nations, where a workforce relies on increasingly temporary and precarious work. In effect, the patterns of employment that were once associated with the third world have come to haunt the west (Beck, 1991). Our empirical exploration predominantly involves workers who inhabit the "Brazilianized" space of migrant labor. To such workers, the realm of religion provides a key, if relatively under-theorized coping mechanism.

In this rest of this paper, I briefly develop some understanding of the community I studied, and discuss ways in which they made sense of their immigrant experience. I focus on the role in which the religious sphere functioned as a space in which they could seek safety from the burden of foreignness that their immigrant status foisted upon them in the workplace. Finally, I relate these ideas to the concrete world of workplace diversity.

The South Asian Shias of New Jersey

There are between 154 and 200 million Shia Muslims in the world today representing 2.3-2.9 percent of the world population (6.8 billion) and 10-13 percent of the world Muslim population (1.57 billion). A significant proportion of these Shias, estimated to be around 33-50 million, have South Asian origins (Pew Research Centre, 2009). The history of Shias in the USA must be understood in the context of the broader contours of Muslim migration across the Atlantic, which presents a tale of continuous adaptation and negotiation (Takim, 2009). Based on the CIA factbook estimates,

it would be reasonable to conclude that around 300,000 people in the USA identify as being Shias.

The first Shia community in the USA emerged among the Arab immigrants of Dearborn, Michigan. Gravitating to the automobile plants of the Detroit area in the post First World War era, Arab Americans began to create a social and cultural space for themselves. Along with the history of Muslim migration to the USA, we need to contextualize the current presence of Shias in the USA within the broader patterns of South Asian migration. While the influx of educated South Asians into the USA following the 1965 initiatives is well documented (Kalita, 2003), a relatively recent phenomenon also concerns the immigration of "refugees from neoliberalism," or people who were dispossessed and rendered economic refugees in their lands after the Green Revolution and structural adjustment policies redistributed their meager earnings upwards. For example, Mathew (2008, pp. 147-176) makes a clear link between the changes in land-holding patterns created by the Green Revolution in Pakistan and India and the larger presence of South Asian taxi drivers in Manhattan. Many dispossessed South Asians ended up in the USA through a variety of circuits, from relatively tame ones like family-unification initiatives by their US citizen relatives and the green-card lotteries of Pakistan and Bangladesh, to more perilous voyages, and many among them occupy the uncertain terrain inhabited by "illegals" in the US economy. The Shias among them are also integral participants in the social and cultural landscape of the community.

The horizontal ties between the US-based Shias and their counterparts in South Asia are also supplemented by relatively weak but nonetheless important "vertical ties" (Levitt, 1998) with the leadership of the Shia faith in Iran and Iraq. The community relies on leadership of spiritual leaders with the power of command within the community, which helps coordinate religious actions across geographic spaces, and to some extent, articulates strategic priorities for the broader Shia community. However, for the most part, spiritual leaders do not play a significant role in shaping the social contours of the community. It is the "horizontal ties" of kinship beyond religion, such as culture and language that do the heavy lifting of producing (and challenging) community.

Institutions emerge
In 2012, there were at least 15 Shia congregations in the New York/New Jersey area, in Queens, Brooklyn and Long Island in New York, and across New Jersey. The community centers for new immigrants serve multiple functions, including as wedding halls, funeral parlors, schools and sites of religious performance. Each community center has its own dominant ethnic flavor. This network of religious institutions is, remarkably, <50 years old. Oral accounts suggest that the first Shia religious event organized in the New York-New Jersey area took place in 1965. In subsequent years, a central non-domestic location also emerged. One of the earlier immigrants, recalls how community members organized a religious event in 1973 in a high school owned by the United Nations in midtown Manhattan. The community quickly identified Shias scattered across three states, and banded into a small (predominantly upper-middle class) community. Each family in the network assumed responsibility for a particular religious observance, often related to a tradition that had existed in their extended families in South Asia. It was not uncommon in the early days for people to drive over 100 miles and cross two state lines to attend a religious event. Such a state of affairs obviously could not have lasted as the community began to grow in size and economic

heterogeneity (e.g. poorer immigrants do not have the luxury of time or mobility). Leaders of each geographic area began to scan the environment for ways in which they could build community centers. The first Shia institution in the northeastern USA opened its doors only in 1975. It attracted congregants from New York as well as New Jersey. This was followed in quick succession by the creation of a publishing house in 1979, a religious school in 1984, youth camps, national Shia conferences, a variety of journals and newsletters, organized pilgrimages and funeral/burial services for the community. Other community centers continue to be built all over the geographic area, to serve the needs of a variety of local communities. However, community members continue to conduct religious observances in their homes, and an informal network of basement events has become a staple of the community.

Occasionally, members of the community have made tentative attempts to use the institutional framework of the community centers to facilitate the assimilation of Shias into the secular mainstream. These include helping fellow Shias to find the finance necessary to start new businesses, workshops on personal finances, voter registration drives or trying to develop formal intra-community business ventures. However, in our experience, such initiatives have found relatively lukewarm responses from the community. A seminar on personal finance, for example, may attract around 20 participants in a center where a typical religious event will attract 300. This does not necessarily imply that economic linkages within the community are not formed. Rather, to us this reflects a typical characteristic of the South Asian Shia community, which finds itself publicly assertive primarily on the cultural front, preferring not to conduct economic activities in the congregational space. One primary exception to the non-economic nature of the space is that of catering for religious and social ceremonies, where over time, local entrepreneurs, mostly loose networks of women, have taken charge and bid for the opportunity to provide food for events. A very organic network provides for examples of economic scalability. For instance, an event may be held where dinner is arranged for 300 people. This dinner may be catered by around seven female entrepreneurs who organize an efficient division of labor and compensation among them, often mediated by non-economic considerations of age and seniority as well. Other incipient arenas of commerce include the retailing of traditional ethnic garments in the community center, the sale of religious artifacts and religious media, and over time, the use of the social network by service professionals like real estate brokers and insurance salespersons.

Transnationalism, generational conflict and political engagement

As the above sections show, South Asian Shias in the USA inhabit the uneasy space of what Benedict Anderson (1991) defined as an imagined community. However, such formulations as Anderson's do not capture the reality that while Shias may idealize a cultural space that transcends geographic place, their identity is constantly brought into flux through the pressures exerted by the nation state, by class and by cultural atavisms like Islamophobia. Be it the precarious class and citizenship position of migrant workers, or the uncertain and continually renegotiated hybridities of religious events, the engagements and dialogues within the emergent South Asian community are far more immediate and unsettled than one would see in a community with a longer history. Neither Anderson's formulations, nor Aihwa Ong's (1999) concept of flexible citizenship, that explores the additional role of increasing travel, modern regimes of communication and various forms of mass media in the production of a transnational public, capture the South Asian Shias with any degree of precision. The South Asian

Shias show strains of both Anderson's and Ong's formulations, but the ethnic and economic heterogeneity of the community, its relatively recent vintage in the USA, and its constant engagement with the most current of US foreign affairs, all produce unique challenges within the South Asian Shias, and their responses are far from being complete.

As discussed briefly in the introduction, the contours of South Asian Shia immigration to the USA have produced three pressure points for the community. First, the challenge of transnationality in the community is much more intense than in earlier experiences. Previous "memories" of Shia migration have been either more gradual or less heterogeneous, thereby rendering their experiences in the US terrain relatively unique. Second, the steady and heterogeneous influx of South Asian immigrants into the US space has produced interesting temporal (generational) dynamics within the community, for which it lacks an existing template of responses. These dynamics play out in the nascent community in fascinating ways, as elders (and new immigrants) in the community simultaneously attempt to police their US-born members and learn from them. Finally, the specific political climate in which the US Shias find themselves produces different challenges and opportunities for the community. On one hand, the community finds itself faced with growing Islamophobia in the public sphere, but on the other, it senses opportunities offered by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the enemies of the US forces are mostly virulent Shia-haters. The intra-community dialogue around these sensitive issues reflects another facet of the coping strategies of a community-in-progress.

Transnationalism

Migration and displacement have been an important element of Shia lore. The early history of Islam was characterized by the forced migration of Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina (Lings, 1983, pp. 118-122). The paradigmatic event of Shia history, the martyrdom of Imam Husain at Karbala (Momen, 1985, pp. 28-34), was preceded by his decision to move with his family from his hometown in Medina. In effect, the community has learned to tolerate and even celebrate its diasporic status, and its collective memory carries hazy recollections and surviving linguistic and cultural artifacts of the transition of their religious traditions and practices across regions and languages. Nagar (1996) describes a situation in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where Khojas who speak Swahili in the marketplace and Gujarati in the house conduct their religious events in Urdu, a language that many in the congregation do not understand. A typical religious event in the USA could involve as many as five languages, among Arabic, English, Urdu, Punjabi, Farsi and Pashto. The trope of religious traditions transcending cultural boundaries is relatively common in the poems and observances of South Asian Shias.

A religious event in New Jersey provides for us a paradigmatic exemplar of transnationalism within the South Asian Shia community. At one level, some of the practices produce an ineffable sense of anachronism. The modernity of the setting, signified by fluid ethnic identities, metropolitan sensibilities and live video-casting across spaces, exists alongside much older formations such as gender segregation, the use of incense and the invocation of 200-year-old poems. The religious function hall functions autonomously, but finds itself in an informally federated relationship with other such institutions in New Jersey and New York. During the course of a year, around 20 religious leaders may visit the function hall from different parts of North America, Europe and South Asia. These speakers become agents of isomorphism as

well as heterogeneity, seeding different communities with their ideas, as well as cross-pollinating ideas and information across community centers. Over time, however, certain community centers become associated with certain traditions, despite the heterogeneity of their congregatory base. A particular space may be seen as being a repository of a South Indian ethos, while another may have a more Punjabi orientation (surprisingly, these do not necessarily reflect the majority ethnic identities displayed in that particular center); some might privilege more passionate displays of emotion, while others may prefer workshops and PowerPoint presentations. Institutions that exist outside the space of the community center also reflect this heterogeneity. Some Shia organizations seek to widen their sphere of concern, such as when the community organized donations and aid for the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and took a team of local doctors to Haiti as part of the international medical task force. Others focussed on more community-centric efforts, such as providing relief for Shia victims of religious persecution and target killings in Pakistan at the hands of the Taliban-affiliated Takfiri Deobandi-Salafist groups. Shias are estimated to be 20 percent of Pakistan's population (Syed, 2008).

The economic heterogeneities of the US landscape also mediate the spread of the Shia community. Religious centers that exist in urban areas attract larger numbers of working class members than more suburban centers. Of course the relatively dense population in the tri-state area makes these divisions less apparent (there are many working class immigrants in central New Jersey, for instance), but the dynamic does tend to be reinforced at various moments. The congregation in Brooklyn, for example, has a number of members who have been part of the prison-correctional system, which makes their challenges far greater, and perhaps deserving of assistance from other centers, whose main financial challenges include the augmenting of existing buildings and facilities to accommodate growing congregations. That mosque has also taken the lead in creating a soup kitchen, which provides food to local indigents regardless of religious affiliation. The soup kitchen organizers declare the following on their Facebook page: "without regard to race and religion, we recognize that hunger is a disturbing factor in our community, so we will be creating a soup kitchen in the basement of the mosque […] please note that the soup kitchen will be available to EVERYONE regardless of race or religion."

Like many immigrant communities, South Asian Shias in the USA can interest disciplinary social scientists in multiple ways. For instance, an economist might be interested in the dynamics of class and the circuits of labor and capital that are manifested in the community. The story of global laborers is very much a story of circuits of capital, the regimes of dispossession that contributed to their migration, the way in which they earned their living and repatriated some of it to their indigent relatives in India. A psychologist would be interested in the way in which they deployed prayer as a coping mechanism, of the stresses they experienced as new immigrants, and specific issues that afflict immigrant groups. A sociologist might wonder how the emerging formal structures such as imambargahs in the USA produce legitimacy for themselves, both within the community and in interaction the broader secular society. These networks of legitimacy are then utilized by immigrants to produce a context for themselves and their place in US society. Anthropologists might see "webs of meaning" in the South Asian Shia experience, while political scientists may analyze the events in light of the broader US experiences with the Shia faith.

But the complexity of the immigrant experience eludes disciplinary boundaries. Neodisciplinary formulations like transnationalism are marginally more helpful, as they allow us to examine how ethnicity, nationality and religious identity enter into mutual negotiation. For the Shias in the New York area, these discussions are complex.

As the cultural minorities within the community develop a critical mass, they are faced with the wrenching decision of how to engage with the broader community. Should the Farsi-speaking people of Afghan and Central Asian origins stay at the congregation in Paterson, New Jersey, leaving the congregation at New Jersey free to imagine itself as a primarily Urdu-centric space? Or should all community centers attempt to be inclusive of all cultures? How should the Urdu-speaking community of Englishtown reach out to the new African-American converts in Brooklyn? Should community centers continue to focus on providing religious services and rely on the emerging social networks to manage other (economic, gender-oriented, generational) challenges? Will a foray into non-religious initiatives stretch the community resources too thin? What are the ethical implications of aggressive personal fundraising in a community where economic heterogeneities may produce alienation among indigent congregants? How do progressive and younger members of the community create a space for their ideas to chip away at what they perceive to be an atmosphere of internalized patriarchy, implicit heteronormativity and an unexamined classist ethos? Such then, are the issues that bedevil this spatially dislocated community-in-progress.

Generational conflict
Within the Shia community, youth groups have been at the forefront of bridging cultural divides and moving beyond the South Asia-centric paradigms. In June 2006, a Shia youth-led initiative called "Independent Viewpoints" conducted a daylong event, which included a dialogue between different religious groups (moderated by a journalist-activist of National Public Radio), and in a coup of sorts, managed to have a keynote address by the notable theorist Noam Chomsky. Likewise, the "Allied Muslim Youth of North America" is another organization that attempts to help Shia youth engage with the religious and secular spaces in the USA. AMYNA has the following mission "The AMYNA movement seeks to create a culture of faith-based activism among the young Muslims of North America by connecting and empowering youth initiatives and activists by providing forums, resources and advocacy." Clearly, there are a lot of liberal spaces where Shia youth can find acceptance and support, and build bridges with other Muslims and non-Muslims. This phenomenon exists in relative contrast to the earlier generation, which preferred to nurture sectarian divides that were rooted in the communities they migrated from.

This is not to say that relations between Shia and Sunni youth in the space inhabited by the new generation sphere always harmonious. It is a fact that in the post-9/11 world, Shia Muslims remain almost completely unaffected by Islamic radicalism and violence which remains a Sunni, mostly Salafist-Deobandi phenomenon. In my research, I came across several instances where young Shias felt alienated in broader Muslim organizations. For example, most observant Shia students of Rutgers University are associated with an organization called "SALAM, the Muslim Student Association of Rutgers." SALAM is a relatively recent part of the student government umbrella of organizations, and according to its Shia members, was principally created because the existing Muslim student group, the "Islamic Society of Rutgers University," began to cool toward its Shia members, particularly as broader political strains between Shia and Sunnis began to be felt worldwide. By some accounts, the student group attempted to rewrite its constitution to ensure that Shias were not eligible for a post on its governance council. Some Shia Rutgers students then used the student-life initiatives at the university to register SALAM, an organization that attempts to be inclusive of all Muslims, but certainly has a strong Shia influence.

Not all youth influences on the Shia landscape are as explicitly political. Some cultural initiatives are also very interesting; especially those that seek to transform the aesthetic of mourning that South Asians have inherited. One such initiative was an Open Mic event organized by Mohammed Ali Naquvi, a UK-born, New Jersey raised Shia of South Asian origin who was a graduate student in law at SUNY Albany. The event was held in Manhattan on February 17, 2008. In Naquvi's words, "In the last few years, first generation and indigenous Shia Muslims have been dabbling in the production of English poetry in praise and lamentation of the martyrs of Karbala (peace be upon them). Unfortunately, this work has usually taken the form of lyrics that have been translated from another language and recited in that same original rhythm. The result is that English *Noha, Latmiyyah and Marsiya* have a forced and unmusical quality to them and are ultimately, uninspiring. However, this does not mean that there is no solution to this problem." He proposed that young people use the event to express themselves in an idiom they could relate to. The Open Mic event was a success, not the least because of an emerging network of Shia youth who use social networking sites like Facebook and other forms of contemporary electronic communication to form what may be referred to as "re-imagined communities."

In spite of these initiatives, it would be incorrect to impute too much agency in the religious sphere to the new generation. They still look up to their elders for cues. It is not uncommon to see young people being trained by their adult peers in the codes of behavior in religious spaces. Likewise, the assertive hand of the older generation is even seen in some of the college-level groupings of Shias, which some youngsters find an act of self-policing. Sometimes, parental interference in the choice of careers by young women is often couched in terms of what would be compatible with a "community-friendly" career for a Shia woman (pharmacists are in demand, for some reason, perhaps because working hours are flexible). Overall, the generational interactions within the community are still characterized by a power differential where the older generation holds the upper hand.

As the above discussion suggests, the religious arena is a space for struggle and incommensurability between generations, but also carries the potential of harmony and mutual respect. New American Shias struggle with their feelings of having left sanctuary behind, but are puzzled when the putative homeland never meets their nostalgic expectations in subsequent meetings. Likewise, the new homeland proves puzzlingly difficult, either to embrace or to scapegoat. Their only hope to understand it is to go to their children, or to their peers born in the western hemisphere, and eventually surrender to their wisdom. Likewise, US-born Shias find that their desire to attain a state of "pure-American-ness" is forever interrupted by their brown skin, their curious craving for spicy foods, and their ability to speak in and understand languages that would sound like gibberish to their "regular American" peers. They must look to their parents, or their new-immigrant peers to channel the mythical space that is simultaneously home and not-home. Incommensurabilities, mutual distastes at each others' habits and attitudes, politics and aesthetics, all have to be managed by both sides of the generational divide, and the South Asian Shia space is another arena where generations kick, scream and snarl their way toward mutual understanding. The new immigrants manage the initial conditions that make the community possible, the community centers, the congregations, the templates of religious activities. The US-born generation then is tasked with rendering these institutions contemporary, transforming them into idioms, metaphors and cadences that belong to the present. These activities necessarily involve debates and arguments that may not always be harmonious.

Political engagement
In his ethnographic analysis of the Shias in India, David Pinault presciently identifies a trend of "quietism" among the members of the community (Pinault, 1992, pp. 169-175). Indian Shias did not use their rituals to motivate their community toward political activism or any form of militancy. Unlike the Shias of Iran, Lebanon and Iraq who have had a history of using religious metaphors Karbala to mobilize social protest in the past (Keddie and Cole, 1986) as well as the present (Nasr, 2006), Indian Shias were more content to leave the discussions of the valor and sacrifice of the Imam and his followers in the realm of the metaphor. This quietism, Pinault rightly identifies, is not a sign of apathy, but rather a difficult balance that Shias in India have to maintain as a minority within a minority in a multi-ethnic nation seeking to develop its own strain of secularism and religious tolerance. The Shias of Pakistan have historically been more socially aggressive than their Indian counterparts, but their attitude too, is relatively quietist, and perhaps follows from the traditions of the later Imams of the Shias, who conducted their religious leadership with relative circumspection, enveloped as they were in a climate of hostile monarchs and subjugated followers.

In the initial stages of the Shia institution building in the USA, the community maintained a similar state of relative quietude, focussing on internal dynamics, and developing relationships with local institutions that had the power to approve initiatives such as the building of community centers. However, they soon began to take advantage of the atmosphere of religious freedom in the USA, perhaps in emulation of other religious groups, and began to assert themselves. Many of their initial efforts in this direction were aimed at developing a private and public separation from their Sunni counterparts, in the tradition of their Lebanese-American counterparts (Walbridge, 1997). The community began to organize a procession in New York City in the first Sunday of the Islamic month of Mohurrum. Also, some limited efforts were made to reach out to the broader secular community by conducting symposium-style congregations such as "Husain Day," an event that aspired to move the story of Imam Husain and Karbala beyond the Shia sphere, but only partially achieved its objectives, gathering relatively few non-Shias, mostly local politicians, liberal pan-religionists and anti-discrimination activists. From a broader political standpoint, the community continues to follow through from the quietist tradition of their ancestors and contemporaries in South Asia, however, in recent years, there has been an increasing concern seen in South Asian Shias, particularly Pakistan-origin Shias, about their ongoing target killings at the hands of the Taliban-affiliated Takfiri Deobandi-Salafist groups, a phenomenon they describe as Shia genocide given the very high casualty rate (more than 19,000 killed so far). Two major protests against Shia genocide were held in March and September 2012 in New York alone.

The US democracy and the sense of religious freedom it produced in the domestic sphere have been responsible for a gradual increase in activism by US Shias. These activities carry an incipient inter-ethnic flavor that is promising, if still low-key. For example, when Ali Naqvi, a Shia entrepreneur heard about a recent initiative by Rabbi Marc Schneier, Russell Simmons and the New York-based "Forum for Ethnic Understanding" where they sought to combat Islamophobia and anti-Semitism through a twinning initiative between synagogues and mosques, he promptly organized a fundraiser where prominent Muslims raised money for the initiative. His unselfconscious and successful act of bringing Shias and non-Shia Muslims together with Jews is a relatively recent phenomenon, and reflects the growing confidence of the community in the theater of public life.

Discussion: toward a flexible understanding of immigrant diversity

What does this analysis of an immigrant community in the making have to do with issues of global diversity? In my understanding, the challenge faced by diversity theorists in the realm of understanding migrant global labor has always been one of analyzing without falling prey to the seductive pulls of fixed categories. Unfortunately, our discipline has not had a distinguished history of avoiding these pulls and pitfalls. Most management research on workplace diversity has traditionally focussed on the instrumental realities of revenue appropriation such as designing global new product teams (Sivakumar and Nakata, 2003), dealing with environments characterized by multilingual workforces (Luo and Shenkar, 2006), analyzing and comparing managerial and HR practices in different countries (Zagelmeyer and Paul, 2012), training employees to work in countries with lesser-understood cultures (Anwar and Chaker, 2003), effective team building using a multinational task force (Govindarajan and Gupta, 2001), and differences in accounting systems in different nations (Salter and Niswander 1995). In the USA, the profound psychological impact of the 9/11 attacks have led to a greater focus on the security implications of global diversity, especially the impact of terrorism and threats of terrorism on HR practices (Kondrasuk, 2004). The hegemonic influence of Hofstede's classification of national culture (Bing, 2004) has led mainstream international management researchers to operate under the blithe assumption that national culture is the unit of analysis to probe for difference, and that archetypal country-level categories can offer an adequate-enough roadmap to the analysis of difference (Beyer and Trice, 1991).

The reality of course, is a bit more complex. Cultures have a way of eluding the straitjackets of national boundaries, sometimes bleeding across nations (Anderson, 1991), and sometimes fragmenting within the national space (DiMaggio, 1997). The workforce across the world has become more international than we had ever imagined. Now, studies in workplace diversity will have to deal with new issues such as outsourcing (Clott, 2004), migration (Mir *et al.*, 2000), international legal constraints (Hu, 2004), refugees (Keane, 2004) and in the theoretical realm, the rapidly unraveling of the dominant discourses of globalization (Banerjee and Linstead, 2001).

The Shias of New Jersey constitute an important element of the global workforce. Wherever migrants travel, they carry the gifts and the baggage of their ethnic heritage. Diversity scholars have often focussed on the ways in which firms and environments can use diversity management initiative to facilitate assimilation. However, such initiatives are in danger of ethnocentric bias. Victorija Kalonaityte's (2010) work on diversity management initiatives in Sweden, undertaken through a postcolonial lens, demonstrates "how an essentialist notion of national culture contributes to the construction of ethnical minorities as culturally inferior" (p. 31).

In this paper, I suggest that perhaps a better way out would be to facilitate the mechanisms by which the global workers, especially the economically disadvantaged among them, cope with the twin burdens of foreignness and socio-economic vulnerability. Issues of workplace diversity in the global terrain cannot be divorced from issues of power and privilege, nor can they be shoehorned into simplistic models. An understanding of global workplace diversity must necessarily be textured, multi-layered and context intensive. A contextual approach to diversity (Syed, 2009) may enable employers to be mindful of the internal heterogeneity of Muslim diaspora and South Asian diaspora, taking into account Shia Muslims religio-cultural traditions and sensitivities (e.g. devotion to Imam Hussain and Karbala, opposition to unjust ruler, etc.), their relatively secular nature, aversion to post-9/11 radicalization, etc.

The South Asian Shias in the USA have a formal history of less than half a century, but have managed to produce an impressive network of institutions that carry the community forward. As is inevitable, the community must grapple with its emerging heterogeneity as it struggles to produce a new identity for itself, and integrates into the global workforce. But as theorists of global diversity, we can learn from such communities, and in turn, raise other issues. Labor enters the global realm through multiple circuits. Our literature and analysis should develop a greater curiosity about the process through which globalization produces diversity. The simple linear circuit of Globalization = porous nation state boundaries = people moving here and there must necessarily be deepened. What are the ways in which capital seeks to control the mobility of labor? What are the ways in which labor subverts these controls? What identity groups then constitute migrant labor in different countries? In what ways are their experiences unique and in what ways can they be generalized into a larger analysis of the relationship between globalization and labor? It is through the examination of such questions that we can develop a greater understanding of the dynamics of global diversity.

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