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‘Keeping Faith’: an exploration of Welsh Muslim identity

Abstract

This paper contributes to research about Muslim communities in Wales (Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 2010; Mellor and Gilliat-Ray 2013), by exploring some of the ways in which Muslims identify with Wales and have brought their faith and traditions into conversation with Welsh cultural, religious, and civic life. This occurs through strategic use of the Welsh language, especially on occasions that ‘celebrate the nation’, recognition and identification with features of the landscape and geography of Wales, and the continuity of leadership of Muslim communities. In addition, the vibrancy of Welsh Muslim institutions suggests that they have a significant role to play in the contemporary religious landscape of Wales. I suggest that they are responsible for sustaining some of the characteristic features of historic Welsh religious culture, in a context where the main denominations of the Christian churches are struggling to maintain active congregations. The energy and activism of Welsh Muslims suggests that they are taking on some responsibility for ‘keeping faith’ in Wales and creating new postsecular spaces and practices in the urban public sphere that engage in a dialogical and reflexive relationship with aspects of Welsh tradition.

Keywords: Wales, Welsh language, Islam, Muslims, nationality, geography, leadership

Islam in Wales - a brief review of history, demographics, and research sources

The settlement of Muslims in Wales on any significant scale began when transient seafarers began to arrive during the later decades of the 19th century (Davies 2011) and especially to the port city of Cardiff (Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 2010). Boarding houses in the docks area of

the city provided the social, economic and religious base for more settled communities to emerge in the early 20th century, with the first mosque being established in 1936. Many of Cardiff's early settlers were Yemenis and Somalis, alongside those originating from the Indian sub-continent, and Muslims in Wales were vital to the First and Second World War efforts in the early and mid-20th century (Ansari 2004; Evans 1985; Sherwood 1991, 1988). This history of Muslim arrival and settlement is well-documented (Ansari 2004; Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 2010).

Since the end of the Second World War, Muslims have settled throughout Wales, though the large majority still reside in the south, in the cities of Cardiff, Newport and Swansea. Some are the descendents of early 20th century seafarers, while others arrived after the Second World War. Data released by the Office for National Statistics in 2018 records a Muslim population in Wales numbering 50,366 with Muslims comprising 1.6 percent of the total population of Wales (ONS 2018; Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 2010). Nearly half of the Muslims in Wales live in Cardiff itself, and in some areas of the city – such as Butetown – they make up 49.1 percent of the population. According to 2011 Census figures, there were 5,415 Muslims in Swansea and a further 6,859 in Newport (Armstrong and Swain 2015). The youthful demographic of the Muslim population throughout the United Kingdom ¹, and the tradition of having larger families are just some of the reasons why, between the Census of 2001 and 2011, there was a seventy-five per cent increase in the number of Muslims (from 1,546,626 to 2,706,066 in 2011) (Ali 2015)². If this same pattern of growth is evidenced in the data arising from the 2021 Census, the Muslim population in Wales will have once again increased substantially over a ten-year period.

¹ 33% of the Muslim population was aged 15 years or under in 2011, compared to 19% of the population as a whole. Only 4% of the Muslim population is 65 years+, compared to 16% of the overall population (Ali 2015)

² Other factors accounting for the increase are: conversion to Islam, recent immigration of refugees and asylum-seekers (Ali 2015).

There are a number of perspectives through which research and writing about Muslims in Wales has been conducted over the years. As a consequence of their migration history, much of the literature derives from studies of race and ethnicity, and employment (Lawless 1994; Evans 1985, 1980; Collins 1957; Little 1948, 1942b, 1942a; Seddon 2014; Sherwood 1991, 1988). Over the last two decades, there have been further contributions from sociologists (Chambers 2006), literary historians (Davies 2011), social geographers (Dafydd Jones 2012, 2010; Whittaker 2018, 2016, 2019), as well as some biographical works reflecting the connections between Muslims in Cardiff and the Yemen (Aithie 2005). Some of the research conducted by staff associated with the Islam-UK Centre at Cardiff University since 2010 has developed this body of writing by documenting the historic establishment of Muslim institutions in Wales (Ahmed 2017; Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 2010). Alongside this existing body of literature, this paper also draws from a large AHRC/ESRC study – the ‘Muslim Families Project’ – conducted between 2008-2011 for which the author was a co-investigator (Scourfield et al. 2013)³. The study involved detailed quantitative and qualitative research with sixty inter-generational families based in Cardiff. We sought to understand both child and parental perspectives on growing up in Wales and the transmission of faith within families. During interview, we explored how their location in Wales (and Cardiff in particular) shaped experiences and identity.

By placing the findings of the Muslim Families Project alongside pre-existing studies and literature, answers to questions about how Welsh Muslims are shaping their identities in relation to Wales and Welshness begin to become apparent. The remainder of this paper considers these issues in more depth by focussing on three main facets of Welsh Muslim identity and experience that appear to be significant, namely, the use of the Welsh language,

³ ‘Religious Nurture in Muslim Families’, 2008-2011, AHRC/ESRC ‘Religion and Society’ Programme grant reference: AHF000065/1. Referred to in this paper as the ‘Muslim Families Project’. Associated publications include (Scourfield et al. 2013; Khan et al. 2013; Scourfield et al. 2012).

the landscape and topography of Wales, and, the character of Muslim community leadership in Wales over the last 80-90 years. As will become apparent, there is a necessary order to this exploration. By highlighting these issues, this paper suggests the need for more considered attention to be paid to the specific geographic, historical and national context in which qualitative research about Muslims in Britain is produced. Rather than assuming that research about ‘British Muslims’ can be unproblematically applied to Muslims throughout the UK (Hopkins 2017), this paper makes a case for detailed consideration of the ways in which British Muslim experiences are nuanced by their location in particular nations within it. One potential by-product of such an exploration might be new evidence of the ways in which Muslims are grafting their traditions onto deep and well-established socio-geographic and religio-cultural roots in particular places and spaces. Given the vibrancy and growth of many Welsh Muslim institutions – helped of course by the youthful demographic of the Muslim population – we can begin to appreciate the way in which Muslims are sustaining and keeping religious faith alive in Wales.

Language

“In our view there is a distinctive national Welsh Culture which can be recognised as such and of which its most easily recognisable, and perhaps its essential feature is the Welsh language” (Carter and Thomas 1969, 61).

Writing in 2006, Paul Chambers notes: “the intrinsic nature of historical Welsh religion – communitarian, egalitarian, counter-cultural, and grounded in a distinctive (and alternative) linguistic experience – offers suggestive parallels with the present day Muslim experience” (Chambers 2006). Chambers seems to be proposing here that where Muslims in Wales are speakers of minority languages derived from the Indian sub-continent or elsewhere in the

majority Muslim world, they can share a sense of solidarity with native Welsh speakers who are also members of a linguistic minority, relative to the general population of the UK (and in Wales as a whole). However, since making this claim some 16 years ago, it is arguable that some Muslims in Wales (and certainly those connected to the larger Welsh Muslim organisations) have begun to recognise the implicit connection between the Welsh language, identity, and notions of belonging to a distinctive place (Carter and Thomas 1969). In the following paragraphs, I explore some of the ways in which Muslims are ‘claiming Welshness’ through use of the Welsh language in both written and spoken form. In so doing, I suggest the historical resonance and political significance of their efforts.

Translation

In 2019, the Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Wales, Saleem Kidwai, outlined his intentions to seek funding for a project to translate the Qur’an into Welsh directly from the Arabic (i.e. not via English)⁴. In seeking to undertake this translation project, Welsh Muslims are in some respects following the lead of Welsh Christians in the 16th century who, via an Act of Parliament, secured a legal framework for the translation of the Bible into Welsh directly from Greek and Hebrew sources⁵. The social, religious and political significance of these efforts by Welsh Christians in the 16th century and Welsh Muslims in the 21st century cannot be underestimated in relation to Welsh history and identity given that translation is, amongst other things, a political endeavour (Elmarsafy 2009). Given that few (if any) native Welsh speakers would be *unable* to read the Qur’an in English, its translation into Welsh is less about making the meaning of the Qur’an accessible, and more about establishing the

⁴ Saleem Kidwai, personal communication, 14th October 2019.

⁵ Christians in Ireland would not have the Bible in Irish until 1685, while Scottish Christians had to wait until 1801 for a Gaelic Bible (Morgan 2016).

Qur'an as part of the canon of Welsh religious life and creating "social connection over time and space" (Gal 2015, 236). If the project is achieved successfully, it may have an integrative effect in bringing the Islamic tradition into the 'everyday' of Wales, in so far as a Qur'an in Welsh takes a place on library, mosque and bookshop shelves.

Following the 1536 Laws in Wales Acts which brought Wales and England together into a single political entity, it was assumed that "linguistic homogeneity" (Llywelyn 1999, 47) would be the eventual consequence, and that Welsh would cease to be the lingua franca in Wales. In fact, quite the reverse occurred. The 1588 Welsh Bible "ensured that the only official and public use to which Welsh might be put was religious: its civil status, taken away by the Act of Union, was restored by the 1588 Bible [and] transferred to a spiritual plane" (Llywelyn 1999, 48). This synthesis of language and religion conferred sanctity on the Welsh language, thereby reinforcing a sense of distinctive identity and defensive separateness from the English. From a religious perspective, the 1588 Welsh Bible instituted a "Biblicised faith" (Morgan 2016) that emphasised both the written and oral nature of the Bible. In the preface, the Welsh Bible translator wrote:

'it is through faith that all must live and faith comes through hearing and hearing by the Word of God a Word which heretofore has been virtually inaudible to the ears of our compatriots as it has been buried in a foreign tongue' (Morgan 2016).

This emphasis on the oral experience of the Bible and the importance of hearing God's Word resonates with the character of the Qur'an as a fundamentally oral and aural experience.

Muslims believe that the word of God was revealed "*in both sound and word* to the Prophet Muhammad" (Gent 2018, 31, emphasis original). If "the familiar sound of recitation is the Muslim's predominant and most immediate means of contact with the word of God" (Nelson 2001, pxiv), much the same could be said for Welsh Christians of the 16th century (many of

whom were illiterate at the time) and their reliance upon oral experience of the Bible in an accessible yet eloquent form of Welsh. The introduction of the Welsh Bible was a dimension in the creation of a distinctive religious culture in Wales characterised by: “the puritan virtues of honesty, thrift, Sabbatarianism and hard word, sobriety and chastity sometimes observed more in the breach than in fulfilment)...while a spirit of moderation and gradual social improvement through education were also fostered” (Morgan 2011, 15).

The conservatism of Welsh society shaped by religion in the later 19th and early 20th centuries, has resonance with the conservatism that has often characterised Muslim communities in Britain, not least in Wales. And of course, the influence of religious non-Conformity “with its ascetic views on alcohol” (Carter and Thomas 1969, 62) overlaps with Islamic prohibition. Writing about the Yeminis living in the Butetown district of Cardiff in the 1940s, the sociologist Kenneth Little wrote:

The principal injunctions of Islam are fulfilled assiduously, and the various prohibitions enjoined by the Prophet are on the whole rigorously observed, as are Ramadan and other fasts and festivals. . . . This constant display of devotion is regarded by the rest of the community with a certain amount of respect and even a little admiration. There is a feeling that it gives “tone” to the district” (Little 1948, 150).

In sum, the translation of the Bible into Welsh did more to preserve the identity of the people of Wales and their language than any other book (Morgan 2011), and in 21st century Wales it is the repository of Welsh cultural memory for those who speak the language today, as well as for those who do not. The “preservation and fostering of the Welsh language is intimately bound up with the freedom of the ordinary Welsh citizen” (Llywelyn 1999, 63), and legislation over the last three decades has sought to preserve, protect and promote the use of

Welsh in public life in Wales ⁶. By aspiring to have the Qur'an translated into Welsh directly from the Arabic, Muslims in Wales are tapping into a long-standing cultural and religious memory. However, finding a scholar with the requisite linguistic skills to undertake the task is likely to be more difficult than it was for Welsh Christians in the 16th century; native Welsh-speaking Biblical scholars would have been entirely familiar with original Biblical languages.

Muslim use of the Welsh language

Prior to the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure of 2011, obliging public organisations in Wales to deliver their services and communications bi-lingually (amongst other things), several major Muslim organisations in Wales were using written and spoken Welsh in many of their public communications. For example, when the Darul Isra Mosque on Wyeverne Road in Cardiff was expanded and renovated in 2010, the internal signage was bilingual, Welsh-English. This makes it highly unusual compared to many other mosques in Britain which usually have signage in a community language and/or English ^{7 8}. In an interview about minority ethnic participation in the 2011 Welsh referendum, and interviewee from the Muslim Council of Wales explained the rationale: “it’s an internal statement, something about the congregation...about the mosque wanting to be within the fabric of Wales” (Whittaker 2015, 405). It is also an ‘everyday’ way of signalling an identification with the Welsh nation and exercising agency in the ongoing and future construction of Welsh-Muslim

⁶ Notably, the Welsh Language Act of 1993 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measures Act of 2011.

⁷ I am unaware of any mosques or Muslim organisations in Northern Ireland or Scotland using Irish or Gaelic.

⁸ Muslims in the Republic of Ireland are beginning to make claims on the Irish language. Irish language is used on the uniform crest of the Muslim National School state-funded primary school in Clonskeagh. ‘Failte’ (Welcome) is written outside the al Mustapha Islamic Centre, Blanchardstown, Dublin. The Islamic Foundation of Ireland (IFI) has the translation of ‘Dublin Mosque’ on the front it, and Kerry Islamic Outreach has Irish on its website. I am grateful to Youcef Sai at Trinity College, Dublin, for this information.

identity. In their discussion of the significance of Billig's *Banal Nationalism* (Billig 1995), Skey and Antonsich note the way in which symbols and discourses linger 'underground' as visible, often unnoticed, but nonetheless powerful ways that shape the way people think and act in the world (Skey and Antonsich 2017). The bi-lingual signage is like the

“unwaved flag hanging limply on the public building we pass every day on our way to work; or the numerous forms of deixis ('we', 'our', 'here', 'the') which populate our daily conversations and the news we read, watch or listen to...all are signs which make the nation an unreflexive presence in our daily lives, a powerful register that shapes the way people think of and act in the world” (Skey and Antonsich 2017, 2).



Figure 1: signage in Darul Isra Mosque, Cardiff © [S. Gilliat-Ray]

The main umbrella body for Muslims in Wales – the Muslim Council of Wales – has become an active member of civil society in Wales by hosting at least one, if not two, major civic-religious occasions through the year. These include an annual 'Interfaith Dinner' usually held to coincide with Interfaith Week in the autumn. One of the most prestigious civic

buildings in Cardiff, ‘City Hall’ is hired for this occasion and up to 500 guests enjoy a banquet and the words of distinguished visiting speakers. Guests will include the most senior leaders in Welsh educational, political, religious, and civic life, such as the Vice Chancellors of the universities in Wales, the Lord Mayor of Cardiff, the Chief Constable of South Wales Police, principal leaders of other religious communities, senior military, leading members of the Welsh Government, and so on. There is a deliberate policy of ensuring that the guest list reflects an approximate 50:50 ratio of Muslims, and non-Muslims, and considerable effort goes into the seating arrangements. Those who address guests prior to the dinner itself have over the years included the Chief Rabbi, Anglican Archbishops, and senior Roman Catholic leaders. The significance of the guest list and the quality of the hospitality are not to be underestimated. But what is noteworthy on these occasions is that any print associated with them (such as invitation cards) and indeed many other public communications by the Muslim Council of Wales are bi-lingual Welsh-English, and recitation of the Qur’an in Arabic at the beginning of such events is often followed by the reading of a translation in English, and in Welsh. The use of the Welsh language on these occasions is part of an effort to signal an alliance with Welshness and to position Muslims at the centre of Welsh civil society, and certainly as a player on the Welsh religious field, in ways that can be “seen, heard and idealised” (Skey and Antonsich 2017, 4). By taking some ownership of the use of Welsh at these high-profile occasions, from the ‘bottom up’ (Antonsich 2016), Muslims in Wales are restoring an historic connection between religion and public life while also demonstrating an appreciation of the political and social significance of the language as a “guardian of Welsh culture” (Chambers 2006, 329). Although the Muslim Council of Wales is under no obligation to abide by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measures Act of 2011, in their use of written and spoken Welsh, senior Muslim leadership are conveying alliance with public bodies that are bound by this legislation and signalling what they want decision-makers in

Welsh society to think about them. It is a way of “talking”, “choosing” and “performing” the Welsh nation (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). In a context where “both Welsh Nonconformity and Islam have customarily operated through the medium of a minority and ‘sacred’ language” (Chambers 2006, 333), the use of Welsh at public occasions hosted by the Muslim Council of Wales reflects new claims about national narratives via the use of language.

This is significant for the younger generation of Muslims who have been born and educated in Wales and will have been formally exposed to the Welsh language at school. Some of the Muslim families who took part in the ‘Muslim Families Project’ (Scourfield et al. 2013) were deliberately sending their children to Welsh-medium schools, and all state-educated children in Wales are required to learn the language until the age of sixteen. This means that most Welsh Muslim children will know some words, even if they do not reach fluency. The children in our study who found this experience linguistically challenging did not have positive things to say about the Welsh language; their parents, in contrast, had far more positive views, not least because of the employment opportunities available to those who are bi-lingual! But even in these cases where Muslim children have struggled to learn Welsh, they will have been acquiring a sense of location in a specific geographic-linguistic territory. This is reinforced by occasions that mark Welshness both within and outside schools, such as St David’s Day on the 1st March, where aspects of Welsh culture, history and identity are publicly celebrated.

Taking ownership of the Welsh language in written and spoken form, and the ability of Muslim school children to speak the language to some extent, makes Muslims in Wales distinctive compared to Muslims in other parts of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, this discussion of language has provided the necessary backdrop for the next section of this paper which explores the landscape of Wales. I understand landscape to mean the visible and topographical features of the earth’s surface, as well as a sense of ‘place’ arising from them,

and I suggest they can be a defining element of distinctive Welsh Muslim experience. At this point, the work of the Welsh philosopher, J.R. Jones becomes important for the way in which he examines the intimate binding connection between language and landscape.

Landscape

Border crossing

Jones uses the term ‘interpenetration’ to explore the way in which land and language have an inseparable relationship with one another.

“A people has two constitutive links – one is exterior, namely the territory which has been lived in across the centuries; and an interior link, namely their language – not so much as a function or technique of communication, but rather as a tradition, an inheritance which is enriched by the passing of the centuries, language in the sense that all the past cultural history of a people is enshrined in its language. Language and land work together to form a people in interpenetration” (J. R Jones, *Prydeindod*, 1966, cited in Llywelyn 1999, 70).

Crossing the border from England into Wales means crossing Offa’s Dyke, and, depending upon the ultimate destination, either the Black Mountains and Brecon Beacons in the south, the Cambrian Mountains of mid-Wales, or the Clwydian range in the North. Offa’s Dyke is a linear earthwork constructed in the 8th century by the Anglo-Saxon King of Mercia (Offa) and it roughly follows the current England-Wales border (Ray and Bapty 2016). In a symbolic sense, the Dyke marks the point at which the interpenetration of language and landscape in Wales occurs as the road signs become bilingual...this being the outcome of successful campaigns to resist the ‘everyday’ oppression implicit in monolingual road signs (Jones and Merriman 2009).

In a context where Welsh people have felt politically beleaguered by the English, the border marks the beginning of a sense of sanctuary that is constructed out of the vital ingredients of Welsh identity, including religion: “the Welsh instinct that the land and people of Wales have a religious referent has a deeply rooted history” (Llywelyn 1999, 79). However, it is worth noting in passing that there is something of an irony about Offa’s own relationship to the Islamic world. In 774 CE, he had a gold dinar minted which depicts himself on one side, with the words ‘Offa Rex’ stamped around the circumference, while on the other, we can see the words of the Shahadah (the Islamic declaration of faith) stamped in faulty/incorrect Arabic. Theories and myths abound in relation to Offa’s motivations, the most likely being that it was an act of commercial acumen and political aggrandisement in order that Offa could trade with Muslim Spain (Gilliat-Ray 2010). Irrespective of his intentions, King Offa and his coin often mark the starting point of timelines tracing the relationship between the Muslim majority world and the British Isles.

In present times, the recent work of the Welsh social geographer, Geraint Rhys Whittaker, is crucial for our understanding of the way in which landscape has come to shape the distinctive character of Welsh Muslim experience (Whittaker 2019, 2018). He has identified the ways in which the topographical and visual distinctiveness of the Welsh landscape can become important for Muslims, especially when they cross the border ‘back home’ to Wales. Some extracts from his field data point to some of the particularities of the Welsh Muslim experience derived from its landscape features:

“when I came home and I saw Port Talbot steel works I was like yes, I’m nearly home” (interviewee cited in Whittaker 2016, 159)

“from visiting [relatives] I can’t wait to get back home to Wales, you know on the M4 [motorway] and just as you pass Bridgend and in the distance you can see the peak of

the Mumbles, honestly it's such a satisfying, it's a great feeling, it's amazing, just amazing " (interviewee cited in Whittaker 2016, 173)

"for me, whenever I crossed the Severn Bridge I felt I was at home" (interviewee cited in Whittaker 2016, 180)

Describing the process of 'coming home' means referring to particular landmarks. The two distinctive motorway bridges over the 1600 metre River Severn estuary crossing (the Severn Bridge and the Prince of Wales Bridge) cross the boundary from England into Wales. The length of these bridges and the scenery of Wales that can be seen from their highest points, creates a tangible and defining border that can generate a sense of attachment to Wales and a personal, 'embodied geography'. But this mapping of identity through reference to the landscape and landmarks is more than a private matter; it enables Welsh Muslims to take some ownership of what home implies and in so doing 'othering' those (such as relatives living in England) who live elsewhere. As Whittaker notes in relation to one of his interviewees, "an attachment to Welshness is constructed which not only imagines abstract ideas of what home stands for...she personalises the landscape as a sub-national symbol and it is used as a tool for assessing her own identity and how she interprets others" (Whittaker 2016, 218).

Islamic traditions in the landscape and Muslim place-making

Thus far, we have considered the way in which border-crossings and their associated landmarks and topography have created opportunities to construct spatial conceptions about what it means to come 'home' to Wales, which can in turn feed into ideas about national self-identity. But to what extent have Muslims been able to mark a presence on the landscape

itself? In areas of Muslim concentration in south Wales, the construction of mosques/Islamic centres, Islamic bookshops, schools, charity shops, and halal grocery stores in particular districts or streets has enabled the ‘Islamisation of space’ (Eade 1996). A walk down ‘City Road’ in Cardiff offers myriad opportunities to experience the rich internal diversity of Muslim communities in the city. But these opportunities have been far less abundant for the more scattered communities of Muslims living in the rural areas of Wales (Dafydd Jones 2010, 758). Another social geographer, Rhys Dafydd Jones has noted the difficulties that the ‘absence’ of distinctive Islamic facilities can present for Muslims living in Wales. However, some important Welsh landmarks do suggest the longstanding relationship between Wales and the Islamic world that are contemporary with the growth of the Muslim population during the 19th century. For example, the village church of Llanbadrig on Anglesey was restored in the late 19th century with substantial funding from Baron Henry John Stanley, a prominent convert to Islam. The tilework and stained glass reflect Islamic artistic styles (Davies 2011, 365), while the gold leaf on the ceiling of the ‘Arab Room’ in Cardiff Castle indicates the influence of Moorish designs. Perhaps the most publicly accessible and visible landmark suggesting the contact between Wales and the Muslim world can be found in the architectural sculpture work on ‘City Hall’. Here, the crescent moon and star, a well-known ‘symbol’ of Islam is carved into the Portland stone (Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 2010).

Returning to the contemporary period, Whittaker’s doctoral thesis contains photos of hijab-wearing Muslim women taking part in the St David’s Day parade in Cardiff. They are holding Welsh flags and wearing a daffodil on their lapels (Whittaker 2016, 198). This physical claiming of the streetscape as part of a visual expression of Welsh-Muslim identity has echoes in the ‘performative marching’ (Werbner 1996, 311) of Sufis in Britain (including in Cardiff itself from the 1940s). Where Werbner regarded the Sufi processions by Pakistani migrants to Britain in the 1980s as part of a “conquest of space” (Werbner 1996, 309), and an

effort to sacralise their local urban environments, Muslim participation in St David's Day parades enables narratives of belonging to find physical expression. The bodies of the Muslim women depicted in the procession become texts upon which a public statement can be made about their Welsh Muslimness and their participation in the civic culture of Wales. But it is also more than that:

“the activities of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities claiming national and sub-national places and contributing to the shaping of these narratives must be seen as a *transformative* relation, which involves the making and remaking of political identifications (Whittaker 2016, 16, citing David Featherstone 2012).

Other research data seem to confirm the generally positive views that Muslims have about living in Wales, or at least in Cardiff, based on its overall geographic size and scale. Parents and children interviewed as part of the 'Muslim Families Project' spoke about the range of Islamic facilities and services available to them. “Cardiff was regarded as both a big and a small city...and the Muslim community as big enough and small enough simultaneously” (Scourfield et al. 2013, 141). In other words, it was a place where they could exercise choices regarding which mosque or madrassah to attend (in much the same way perhaps, as Welsh Christians exercise choices about which places of Nonconformist worship they do, or perhaps more specifically do not, attend), and yet, the scale of the city made it easy to connect with family and friends, or indeed, monitor more closely the behaviour of their children. Cardiff was regarded as less 'busy and impersonal', than cities such as Birmingham or Manchester, and as such, a 'better place' to be a Muslim than other places in the UK.

The geography and scale of Wales has arguably enabled another distinctive feature of Welsh Muslim experience. Participation in the public life of Wales, and engagement with civic and

political leaders, has been a hallmark of Muslim leadership in Wales for nearly a century. It is to this final theme that I now turn.

Leadership

From the 1930s onwards the significance of Muslim settlement in Wales, especially in relation to local authorities in Cardiff, was enhanced by the arrival of an entrepreneurial Yemeni religious leader and former seafarer, Shaykh Abdullah Ali Al-Hakimi (Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 2010). Al-Hakimi was the spiritual successor of Shaykh Ahmad bin Mustafa al-Alawi, the founder of a Sufi order (*ṭarīqah*) based in Algeria. The historian Richard Halliday notes that relatively little is known about Al-Hakimi's life (Halliday 1992, 28), but he was evidently a man of "considerable energy and organizational ability" (ibid.), most especially because of the role he played as an interlocutor between Muslims in Cardiff and local civic officials.

Al-Hakimi was an articulate advocate for the interests of Muslims in relation to projects such as the establishment of a mosque, and negotiations with Cardiff City Council's 'Parks and Open Spaces Committee' for a separate Muslim burial ground in the Ely Cemetery in 1936 (Evans 1985). His entrepreneurialism in Cardiff extended nationwide via his activism on behalf of Yemenis and other Muslim groups, making Cardiff something of a hub for British Muslim affairs in the 1940s. The sociologist Sydney Collins noted that: "Moslem [sic.] conferences concerned with social, religious and political matters are often held here" (Collins 1957, 217), while Richard Lawless reported that Al-Hakimi "grandiosely styled himself as 'Head of the Muslim Community in the UK'" (Lawless 1994, 44-5). But based on his observations of life in Britain, Al-Hakimi, "began to stress the importance of a more open attitude to other religious and to emphasise how Muslims could learn from societies and beliefs

other than their own” (Halliday 2010, 30). In many ways, his influence is still discernible among Muslims in Wales today, as we shall see shortly.

When the Nur al-Islam mosque in the Butetown area of Cardiff was re-opened in 1947 (having been badly damaged by bombing during the Second World War) it provided an opportunity for civic recognition of Muslims in the City. The documents necessary for the formal registration of the mosque were signed at Cardiff City Hall, one of the most prestigious buildings in the capital. The Lord Mayor of Cardiff, Councillor W.H.J Muston attended a dinner at the mosque as a guest of al-Hakimi to mark the opening (Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 2010). However, the most telling evidence of Al-Hakimi’s recognition by local civic officials came when he was preparing to leave Cardiff to return to the Yemen.

“At a dinner given by Sheikh Abdulla in Cardiff in July 1950, attended by the Deputy Lord Mayor and other leading citizens, the Assistant Chief Constable paid tribute to the law-abiding behaviour of the Muslim community under the leadership of Shaikh Abdulla” (Lawless 1993).

Following his departure from Cardiff, the successful cultivation of civic officials was continued by his Deputy, Sheikh Hasan Ismail, who was in turn succeeded by his adopted son, Sheikh Said Ismail (Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 2010). Sheikh Said had arrived in Cardiff as a young man in the 1940s, and gradually assumed the religious leadership of Muslims in the city, especially those of Yemini origin. He lived and worked in the city for over 69 years and is one of the longest-serving Imams in the history of Muslims in Britain. He was certainly the first Welsh Muslim to serve as chaplain to a political/civic leader, this being Paddy Kitson, chair of South Glamorgan County Council (Davies 1988).

Early Muslim engagement with civic and political authorities in Cardiff was initially enabled and mediated by Sufi sheikhs. But over the course of the last thirty years, the mediation role

they played has been increasingly shared with, if not overtaken by ‘community leaders’ (Burlet and Reid 1998; Gilliat-Ray 2010; Werbner 1990) whose educational, professional and economic capital has developed and extended the foundations laid by Al-Hakimi and his successors. These ‘community leaders’ typically arrived in Britain after the Second World War for the purposes of education and they developed their skills in public life through business and professional occupations. Their capacity to take on leadership roles fortuitously coincided with the introduction of aspects of self-governance in Wales via the implementation of the Government of Wales Act of 1998 and the creation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999. This new political environment came at just the right time in relation to Muslims in Wales having both a critical mass and sufficient social and human capital to contribute to the shaping of new civil society relationships.

It was in this context that the Muslim Council of Wales was established in 2000, and it provided a more structured form of leadership and representation of Muslim interests in civil society. For the last 20 years, the role of Secretary General has been occupied by Saleem Kidwai whose services to diversity and business in Wales were recognised by his appointment as an OBE in 2006. His efforts in terms of relationship-building across a wide spectrum of civil society in Wales has consolidated the articulation of Muslim interests close to the decision-makers in political, educational, religious, business, military, and social spheres. The first issue of the MCW magazine *Reflections* was concerned with the 2011 Referendum⁹ and was full of pro-devolution rhetoric (Whittaker 2015). In an interview with Geraint Whittaker, Kidwai stated that the adoption of this stance was about ‘how we wish to determine the course of our future as Welsh Muslims’ (cited in Whittaker 2015: 401).

⁹ Following a referendum on the National Assembly for Wales’s legislative powers held on 03 March 2011, the people of Wales voted in favour of granting the National Assembly for Wales further powers for making laws in Wales.

Through his ability to network with the Imams in the city, Kidwai was able to encourage them to engage with devolution issues during the course of their Friday sermons.

Under Kidwai's inclusive and generous style of leadership, the MCW has instituted annual inter-faith dinners (as described above) to which the 'great and the good' from across Wales are invited; these dinners are now embedded in the social-civic-religious calendar of Wales. Where Cardiff City Hall provided the 'stage' for the signing of Nur al-Islam documentation in 1947 - a building with sculpture-work depicting the 'star and crescent' of Islam on its exterior vestibule arch - the MCW Interfaith Dinners today are also hosted in this most prestigious city centre venue thereby continuing a well-established tradition of mutual Muslim community - civil society recognition. The diversity of people invited to these grand occasions provides recognition of, and solidarity with, National Assembly commitments to the idea of Wales as inclusive and heterogenous. In this way, the Muslim Council of Wales has been engaged in the transformation and reframing of political relationships, thereby reshaping the character of civil society as an active agent of change. Perhaps the most triumphant accomplishment in the recent history of the Muslim Council of Wales was the ability to bring the four senior/presiding Anglican Archbishops of the British Isles to Cardiff for the 2015 Interfaith Dinner. It was one of the few occasions in the history of the Anglican Church when the most senior leaders were present in the same place and at the same time, beyond internal Anglican meetings.



Figure 2: The 10th Anniversary of the launch of the Islam-UK Centre at Cardiff University was held in partnership with the Muslim Council of Wales's annual Inter-faith Dinner in 2015. Pictured from left to right: David Chillingworth (Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church); Saleem Kidwai (Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Wales); Justin Welby (Archbishop of Canterbury); Sophie Gilliat-Ray (Director of the Islam-UK Centre, Cardiff University); Barry Morgan (Archbishop of Wales); Richard Clarke (Church of Ireland Primate of All Ireland). © MCW



Figure 3: A small box of chocolates for each guest are placed on the tables at MCW dinners, their wrapping conveying a self-explanatory message (© S.Gilliat-Ray).

However, the events of 9/11 were a catalyst for the accelerated development and consolidation of relationships between Muslims and political/religious leaders in Wales. As a pro-active response to the terrorist attacks, the National Assembly for Wales created an Interfaith Council for Wales in 2002.

“...for the first time ever in Wales, both Christian and non-Christian groups were sitting at the same table in a truly national forum with the *imprimatur* of the Welsh political establishment and in the full glare of the media spotlight...[it is] testimony both to the enabling impact of political devolution on the Welsh religious sphere, and the ways in which religious institutions in Wales are seeking to publicly contribute to the building of an inclusive Welsh public culture that reflects both the changing basis of the Welsh national identity and the new system of governance (Chambers 2005a, 7)”.

The establishment of the Interfaith Council provided an opportunity for Saleem Kidwai, as Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Wales, to continue the outward-facing approach to public and inter-faith relations first instituted by Al-Hakimi 60 or so years prior ¹⁰.

The Interfaith Council also provides a context for appreciation of the common ground Muslim communities share with the traditions of Welsh religious Nonconformity. These include, for example, organisational characteristics, such as the self-governance of their respective religious institutions. Welsh chapels were funded, built and organised by local communities independent of external ecclesiastical structures; mosques are also independent institutions, albeit affiliated to larger organisational structures in some cases. Similarly, compared to the Anglican and Catholic denominations, neither Islam nor Welsh non-Conformity have the same “historic continuity” (Morgan 2011, 30) in the overall history of

¹⁰ The Interfaith Council for Wales has subsequently been replaced by the Faith Communities Forum. The Interfaith Council became a separate body, and the Faith Communities Forum now acts as an official committee of the Welsh Government.

Wales. The degree to which Muslims, via the MCW, have engaged with inter-faith, political and civil life in Wales conveys recognition of the need to take responsibility for the future of the country, while also being sensitive and mindful of its past.

There is a clear continuity in the character of Muslim leadership in Wales that has been sustained by those who succeeded Al-Hakimi despite a transformation in the underpinning impetus - from the Sufism of Al-Hakimi and his immediate successors - to the more professionally-grounded contemporary leadership of Kidwai. In either case, it might be characterised as outward-facing, politically skilful, religiously entrepreneurial, and respectful of the historic religious culture of Wales. Writing in 2005, Chambers and Thompson wrote: “Muslim leaders see Wales as “essentially still a Christian society and themselves, along with established Christian institutions, as inheritors of this Welsh religious tradition” (Chambers and Thompson 2005, 345). This being the case, there is an argument to be made that with the decline of Christian congregations in Wales (Chambers 2005b), Muslims are taking up the mantle of ‘keeping faith’ in Wales.

Muslim women as interlocutors and leaders

This consideration of leadership has so far concentrated on the role of men, but there are important ways in which Welsh women have exercised their own form of leadership and community-building in both the private and public spheres. Some of the Yemeni and Somali seafarers who settled in Cardiff (and other major port cities such as South Shields) between and after the Second World War married local women (Collins 1951; Sherwood 1988). These women had an important “integrative influence” (Ansari 2004, 99) in their capacity to act as interlocutors. Because their husbands were away at sea for long periods of time, their wives (who often converted to Islam) (Collins 1951) necessarily assumed leadership of their

households and acted as intermediaries with local authorities, shipping companies and the local authorities. Against the background of the racism prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s, the anthropologist Sydney Collins noted...

“a very important role of the white woman is that of an intermediary between her family and members of the white community. In this position she is able to gain concessions from the privileged group for the benefit of members of the underprivileged. Two principles are applied in this respect – concealment and sympathy. In the first, she conceals her husband’s racial identity in seeking these concessions from those of her own race. For example, if a house is to be rented, the wife is sent to negotiate the terms, and not until the agreement has been completed is her husband’s identity revealed” (Collins 1951, 800-1).

A Welsh Muslim convert held in the affections and memories of many older Muslims in Cardiff today is “Olive” Salaman, known locally as the “mother of the Yemenis” (Aithie 2005, 190). Born into a devout Methodist family in 1921, Olive married Ali Salaman, the owner of the ‘Cairo Café’ in Butetown in 1937. She became the matriarch of the café and the local community, not least because of the ten children to whom she gave birth and the number that her and her husband fostered and adopted (“Film makers capture life in Cardiff docks” 2005, Wales Online). Olive “swapped one culture for another, Mohammed rather than Wesley was the Prophet, and [she] spoke Arabic with a Welsh accent” (O’Neill 2001, 185). For much of the 20th century, an atmosphere of sociability, trust, and mutual assistance characterised the Butetown area of Cardiff, largely deriving from the influence of women: ‘if there was a unified “community” in The Bay, it was cemented together by the women’ (Sherwood 1988, 67).

In the contemporary period, visibly Muslim women have assumed positions of leadership and influence in the religious and national politics of Wales. For example, the niqab-wearing Saudi-born activist Sahar al-Faifi honed her leadership skills as the lead of the Islamic Society during her time at Cardiff University, and has served as the Assistant Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Wales. Currently she is a member of the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru. She is standing for nomination to the South Wales Central regional list in May 2021, and if elected, will be one of the first Muslim woman in the Senedd¹¹. In her blog post at the time of the Referendum to decide whether the UK should remain in the European Union, Ms Al-Faifi made proud assertions of her Welsh Muslim identity, and illustrated her post with an image of the Welsh flag superimposed over the flag of the European Union (al-Faifi 2016). She makes frequent references to her Welsh Muslim identity in her numerous public statements: “I live in Wales. Wales is part of me and I am part of Wales” (“From apathy to action: A Muslim activist standing up against Islamophobia” 2020). On her website (<http://www.sahar-alfaifi.com>) she describes her ambition to

“unlock the power of civil society, widen the Muslim participation and engagement and build a broad-based alliance for different campaigns that include welcoming refugees, living wage, anti-racism, women's empowerment and anti-Islamophobia.

She is also a blogger at Huffington Post, written for the Independent and participated at many TV shows and debates against UKIP” (accessed 10.12.2020)”

Sahar’s activism with Plaid Cymru can be seen as one of the outcomes of the party’s deliberately positioning itself as an inclusive organisation that aims to represent

¹¹ Natasha Asghar (daughter of the late Senedd member, Mohammad Asghar who was himself the first Muslim in the Senedd) could also be elected on the same day in South Wales East (she is second on the Conservative list).

“ a diverse multi-cultural and multi-linguistic Wales... Muslims have increasingly found common ground with Plaid Cymru, notably in the field of cultural politics and linguistic questions. The party now has three Muslim councillors (in Cardiff, Conwy, and Newport) and under the auspices of Assembly Member Leanne Wood, Shadow Social Justice Minister, has called for all children in Wales to have the right to be provided *halal* food in school. Indications from within Plaid Cymru suggest that the party intends to broaden its interest in religious and political issues generally and that issues relating to Islamic dress (hijab) and the status of minority language groups in Wales may well be added to the Welsh political agenda in the future” (Chambers 2006, 332).

Under the leadership of Saleem Kidwai, the future-facing stance of the Muslim Council of Wales was clear, as was his effort to see the flourishing of Islam rest upon the development of young people, those in positions of religious leadership, and women such as al-Faifi. It is no coincidence that the acronym ‘ADFYWIAD’ (the Welsh word meaning ‘resurgence’) was used to identify one of its flagship projects, namely, the ‘Advisory Directorate for Youth, Women, and Imam’s Active Development’.

Keeping faith?

The vibrancy of Nonconformist Christianity in Wales in the 19th and early 20th centuries led to the Welsh as being described at the time as a ‘religion shaped people’ (Chambers 2005b, 1). It was a period characterised as a time of “intense religious enthusiasm and rigid public morality” (ibid.), which found expression in the formation of new congregations and audiences keen to hear the gospel via the preaching of charismatic evangelists. The Industrial Revolution was a catalyst for this revival of Christianity in Wales. Immigrants to Wales from

Catholic Ireland revived the Roman Catholic Church, and industrialisation created the conditions for a social movement based on working-class Nonconformity (ibid.). However, this religious vibrancy was not sustained, and a combination of social and financial circumstances began to weaken the strength of religion in Wales through the 20th century. Chambers describes how competition from cinemas and the rise of socialism, combined with the financial pressures of over-provision of chapels and churches (especially in rural areas) undermined the position of religious institutions in Welsh society (Chambers 2005b). In the post-Second World War period, there has been steady decline in chapel attendance, with only the more evangelical churches (especially in urban areas) holding their own. “From the 1970s onwards the rate of religious decline in Wales was, and continues to be, higher than anywhere else in the United Kingdom” (Chambers 2005b, citing ; Brierley and Wright 1995). A picture emerges of a Wales where Christianity has gradually been dissociated from national identity.

“The peculiar paradox of modern Wales...is that for a nation so strongly associated with Christianity, it is, according to the 2011 census, the least religious part of Britain: nearly a third of people declared they had no religious identity” (Ahmed 2017)

But despite the gloomy picture of church and chapel closures and reduced identification with religion, Chambers identifies civil society as an important space for religious communities to play a role in Wales in reaffirming, “through cooperation with other agencies, the principle of community and, ultimately, in shaping faith in the new Wales” (Chambers 2005b, 229). This paper has provided evidence of the way in which through the Muslim Council of Wales, Welsh-Muslims have become proactive agents in this process, not least by forming strategic political alliances and engaging in interfaith dialogue at the highest levels of civil society (Ahmed 2017). They are shaping a postsecular Wales and giving religion ‘new visibility in the urban public sphere’ (Cloke et al. 2019). Muslim Council of Wales events and campaigns are themed around ‘the common good’, respect for difference and diversity, hospitality, and

effort to create social justice and equality in partnership with other Welsh organisations which share such aspirations. The numerical growth and strength of Muslim communities and the creation of new infrastructures in the form of mosques and Islamic institutions (especially in Cardiff) gives Welsh-Muslims a strong platform from which to bring their faith and identities into dialogue with the culture and history of Wales. “Mosques, churches, and religious groups are integral parts of the civil sphere, creating networks and relationships beyond the state, and creating spaces for social change” (Ahmed 2017).

Conclusion

This paper has identified three ways in which Welsh Muslim identity is being shaped by – and is proactively engaging with – the history and culture bound up with the Welsh language, the particular topographical and landscape features of Wales, and a well-established tradition of entrepreneurial outward-facing Muslim leadership. Together, these give Muslim communities in Wales a complexion that arguably marks them out distinctive from Muslims in other countries of the United Kingdom, and signals ways in which Welsh-Muslim identities are being formed in a very particular conversation with Welsh history and culture. Over the last century, Wales has provided an especially hospitable context for the establishment of Muslim institutions and communities. This isn't to say that their experiences have been wholly unproblematic, either historically, nor in the contemporary period. The legacy of the 1919 'Race Riots' (Evans 1980) still resonate in 2019, and Muslims in Wales today can still be the victims of violent and hostile Islamophobic prejudice (Ahmed 2017). But the distinctive religious culture of Wales that has flowed from its traditions of non-Conformity has cultivated a communitarian social culture that resonates with the family-orientated ethos and communitarianism of many Muslim communities.

“Welsh spirituality is often experientially posited on an instinct that the individual quest for identity can only be resolved when the individual is inserted in a community, be it a local one or a national one. This spirituality is therefore fundamentally communitarian...while there is ample scope for the individual, individualism (as a vitiated sense of individual identity, one which is not in healthy interpenetration with one’s social identity) does not seem to be a tendency of this tradition....the nation is the community which provides meaning for the individual” (Llywelyn 1999, 8).

Those Muslim families who took part in the ‘Muslim Families Project’ recognised that Welsh communities had some characteristics that were very familiar to them such as “traditional values, being ‘close knit’, and respecting elders” (Scourfield et al. 2013, 194). But in tandem with this communitarianism, there is also the fact that “Welsh religiosity has historically allied itself to the principle of religious dissent and the right of the individual to follow his or her own path to spiritual enlightenment” (Chambers 2004, 53). This being the case, Muslims in Wales have been able to shape the establishment of their institutions and communities in a broadly conducive environment that, over time, has enabled not only the claiming of decidedly ‘Welsh Muslim’ identities, but has brought greater plurality to the notion of Welshness itself (Llywelyn 1999, 185).

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