

**TITLE**

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**JOURNAL**

Social Identities (special issue 'Pluralising Muslim Youth Identities: Nation, Religion and Gender in the Global South')

**DATE DEPOSITED**

20 May 2020

**This version available at**

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**Paper 4 - *Social Identities*** (special issue 'Pluralising Muslim Youth Identities: Nation, Religion and Gender in the Global South')

## **Fracturing the Nation: Muslim Youth Identities in Multi-Religious States**

**Kathleen Fincham and Máiréad Dunne**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, we focus on the production of Muslim youth identities within multi-religious states. Using empirical case study research from Lebanon and Nigeria, we discuss how the historical specificities of state formation have produced internal cleavages within the corresponding nation-states and how these have shifted over time. We also discuss how the agglomeration of different ethnic and religious groups in the formation of these states has produced internal fractures that are constantly revived by youth in their identity discourses. Our focus in this paper is on the ways that youth identity discourses are constructed at the intersections of religion and nation. Using a comparative analysis across these two country contexts, we explore the ways that youth articulate their own identities with reference to internal others within their nation. More specifically, we examine how religious differences both between Muslims and Christians, and amongst Muslims, intersect with the national imaginaries in complex and contradictory ways. In this way, youth allegiances both shape and threaten the internal cohesion of the nation.

**Key words:** youth identities; internal others; postcoloniality; nation; Lebanon; Nigeria

**Word count:** 7436

### **Introduction**

Within the current global climate of social uncertainty, increasing fears about youth alienation and the radicalisation of Muslim youth in the Global South in particular, this paper focuses on the production of Muslim youth identities within the multi-religious states of Nigeria and Lebanon. The case studies on youth in Nigeria and Lebanon highlight the importance of 'othering' and the framing of 'us' and 'them' in the production of youth identities. Adopting a post-colonial/post-structuralist theoretical framework, and using focus group data with youth coupled with observations in local contexts, we discuss the historical specificities of state formation to trace how the agglomeration of different ethnic and religious groups in the construction of these states has produced internal

fractures. As Nigerian and Lebanese youth construct their identities at the intersections of nation, ethnicity, religion and gender within the everyday contexts of the local (but with reference to the regional and global), they articulate their identities with reference to these fractures and to internal others within their nation. As religious differences intersect with national imaginaries for the youth in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, these allegiances of affiliation and difference have profound implications for the ways that youth understand themselves and their position in the world. They also shape and threaten the internal cohesion of the nation.

The next section provides background information on the complex geographical, political and social contexts in Nigeria and Lebanon in which this research was conducted and through which young people in these countries develop social relations and networks that help them to construct and navigate their identities. This is followed by discussion around the theoretical framing and methodology of the research. Finally, an analysis of the key findings of the research is presented in relation to how Muslim youth in Nigeria and Lebanon construct their identities in relation to nation and religion.

### **Research contexts**

With regards to an analysis of how youth in the Global South produce, articulate and perform their identities within the local contexts of their everyday lives, the country contexts of Nigeria and Lebanon have a number of important similarities.

First, both countries are relatively new nations which have emerged from a colonial past. Moreover, in both cases, religion was implicated in state formation. In Nigeria, the historical introduction of Sunni Islam was closely tied to trade links and the development of trans-Saharan trade routes (circa 1100-1400 AD). From 1450 onwards, coastal trade links with Europeans, which included the transatlantic slave trade, were the precursor of specific attempts to bring Christianity to Southern Nigeria by missionaries in the 1840s (Falola and Heaton, 2008; Nwabueze, 1982). In 1914, British colonial powers amalgamated the Northern Protectorate (largely populated by Sunni Muslims), the Southern Protectorate (largely populated by Christians) and the Lagos Colony to form the three regions (North, South-East and South-West) which comprise the modern nation-state. Nigeria formally gained its independence from Britain in 1960.

In the case of Lebanon, Christianity predates Islam in the region, with the city of Tyre (the fieldwork location) being specifically mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. From the 16th century until the beginning of the 21st century, the land and people comprising the modern

nation-state were part of the (Sunni-ruled) Ottoman Empire (based in modern-day Turkey). After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) put the territory of what is now the modern state of Lebanon under the control and influence of France. Originally part of Greater Syria, the borders of Lebanon (centred around Mount Lebanon) were drawn by the French to carve out a Christian-majority country in the midst of the predominantly Muslim Middle East. Territories to the north and south of Mount Lebanon, as well as the Beqa'a Valley and Beirut (largely populated by Sunni and Shi'a Muslims), were subsequently added to form Greater Lebanon, the precursor of the modern state of Lebanon. Greater Lebanon was officially put under French Mandate by the League of Nations in 1920. Lebanon officially gained its independence from France in 1943.

As a result of their historical origins, both Nigeria and Lebanon have marginal Muslim majority populations within multi-religious states. While Nigeria may be described as a multiparty secular democracy, religion plays a significant role in the political process and in the lives and identities of its population (Sampson, 2014). Although neither ethnicity nor religion has been included in a Nigerian census, it is estimated that about 50% of the population are (Sunni) Muslim, predominantly living in the Northern states, a further 40% are Christian, residing mostly in the south, with another 10% practising traditional religion (CIA, 2015). The absence of systematic data collection, however, means that the above estimates need to be considered with caution. In addition to questions about the relative size of religious groups reported above, the data occlude the diversity within each group and do not take account of syncretic overlaps between different faiths (See Paper 5 in this issue for further discussion). Specifically there is no reference to estimated proportions of Shi'a Muslims or Sufi orders such as Tijaniyya, Qadiriyya and Mouride or the differences between Protestant, Catholic and other Christians. Given this complexity, Nigeria has been struggling to reconcile its multi-religious composition in the imagining of a unified nation-state.

In the case of Lebanon, the only parliamentary democracy in the Middle East, on-going religious tensions have meant that no official population census has been taken in the country since 1932 when there was a small Christian majority. As a result of the emigration of large numbers of Maronite Christians and a higher Muslim birth rate, the overall Muslim population (Sunni and Shi'a) has vastly increased and is currently estimated to be approximately 54% Muslim, 40.5% Christian and 5.6% Druze (CIA, 2015). Shi'a Muslims (the focus of the research sample in Lebanon) comprise a significant portion of the Muslim population in Lebanon and are estimated to be approximately 30–40% of the total Lebanese population. Geographically, Shi'a make up the majority in South Lebanon, the Beqa'a Valley and the southern suburbs of Beirut. Similar to Nigeria, Lebanon's multi-religious

composition has challenged the imagining of a unified nation-state. Moreover, religious tensions in Lebanon have been at the heart of internal conflict in the country since independence (Fisk, 2001).

In both Nigeria and Lebanon, religion is implicated in the constitution/state organisation, and power-sharing arrangements between dominant religious groups has been used as a key strategy to address religious tensions. For example, a federal republic was established in Nigeria which gave formal recognition to three different regions (North, South-East and South-West) in an attempt to recognise their religious differences. Extraconstitutional arrangements in the country are such that the presidency usually rotates between a Muslim Northerner and a Christian Southerner. In Lebanon, the government gives formal recognition to different religious communities under its 'confessionalist' system of government, and the Lebanese Constitution requires that the President must be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of the Parliament a Shi'a Muslim. These power-sharing arrangements make governance and legal systems within both countries extremely complex.

Largely as a result of lobbying and favouring of particular groups and regions by colonial administrations, both Nigeria and Lebanon have had struggles with post-independence democratic processes, as well as histories of fragility and conflict. Before and since independence, Nigeria has experienced multiple conflicts, notably those against the British colonial administration and military regimes, as well as inter/intraregional conflicts and the insurgencies of Boko Haram in some Northern states. In Lebanon, sectarian tension in the country boiled over into a devastating civil war, which lasted for almost 16 years (1975-1990). Since then, Muslim groups have consistently demanded that political representation should reflect their increased proportion in the population, while many Christians fear a Muslim majority and Sunni Muslims fear a Shi'a Muslim majority. This communal tension has been at the heart of most internal conflict in Lebanon since independence. Moreover, some of these internal conflicts have spilled over into regional conflicts, most notably in ongoing conflict with Israel and more recently in the war in Syria.

Both Nigeria and Lebanon also have large youth populations. In Nigeria, 19.3% of the population is between 15 and 24 years, and in Lebanon, 17.20% of the population falls within this age range (CIA 2015). Moreover, both countries have enduring gender inequalities in terms of literacy, land ownership, labour force participation, wages and labour market segmentation. The wide gender gap has left Nigeria ranked 125 out of 145 countries on the WEF Gender Ranking and Lebanon ranked 138 (WEF, 2015).

Although Nigeria and Lebanon share many similarities, the two countries also differ in significant ways. In terms of size, Nigeria is a large country both in terms of territory (910,000 km<sup>2</sup>) and population (currently estimated to be in excess of 160 million). One in four Africans is Nigerian (Humphreys with Crawford, 2014). In contrast, Lebanon is a very small country with a total land area of just 10,400 km<sup>2</sup> and an estimated population of just 5 million.

The two countries also differ in terms of levels of human development. On the Human Development Index (2017), Nigeria is classified as a country with 'low human development' (ranking 152 out of 188 countries). Moreover, within Nigeria, there are vast differences in levels of development by region, with northern areas (largely populated by Muslims) far more likely to be economically disadvantaged than southern ones (largely populated by Christians). On the other hand, Lebanon is classified as a state with 'high human development' (ranking 76 out of 188 countries). However, Lebanon is also plagued by significant regional inequalities, with areas populated by Shi'a Muslims (south Beirut, south Lebanon and the Beqa'a Valley) far more likely to be disadvantaged.

There are also large differences between country contexts in relation to population demographics. In Nigeria, there are estimated to be as many as 500 ethnic groups in the country with each of the three regions identified by a major ethnic group, namely Hausa-Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the west and Igbo in the east. Along with English, the respective languages of these groups (Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo) are the official languages of Nigeria. On the other hand, Lebanon's ethnic 'homogeneity' (95% Arab, 4% Armenian) stands in sharp contrast to its religious plurality. The official language of Lebanon is Arabic, although French and English are widely spoken.

Nigeria and Lebanon also differ markedly in relation to education. While Nigeria has a centralised public education system, the country is recorded as having the world's largest number of children out of school. Primary school enrolment in Nigeria is sensitive to both gender and location, with participation rates being lower for girls (54.8% for girls as compared to 60.1% for boys) and for children in rural areas, in the north, amongst nomads and amongst Muslims (Humphreys with Crawford, 2014). Youth literacy rates (15-24 yrs) in Nigeria are also lower for girls (58% for females compared to 75.6% for males), as is school life expectancy (8 yrs for females as compared to 9 yrs for males).

In contrast to Nigeria, the education system in Lebanon is largely decentralised, with the public/private divide being particularly acute in relation to higher education. In Lebanon, primary

school net enrolment is very high (97.3% for males and 96.8% for females), and school life expectancy is 12 yrs for males and 11 yrs for females. Moreover, youth literacy (15-24) is almost universal at 98.4% for males and 99.1% for females. There are, however, significant regional and communal inequalities in terms of educational quality disadvantaging areas of the country, which have predominately Shi'a populations (Frayha, 2009). Despite the high levels of youth literacy and school life expectancy in Lebanon, youth unemployment is extremely high (22.1%), and Lebanon is located in the global region (MENA) with the world's highest rates of youth unemployment and lowest rates of female labour force participation (ILO, 2015).

The next section discusses the key themes through which this research is framed, namely identity, nation, religion and ethnicity. (Although gender is a key axis of identity and integral to constructions of nation, religion and ethnicity, it is singled out for specific analysis in the book by Dunne, Durrani, Fincham and Crossouard entitled 'Troubling Muslim Youth identities: nation, religion, gender' and in other papers in this special issue). In the discussion below, particular reference is made to the intersections of nation and religion among youth in the more disadvantaged sections of the multi-religious and post-colonial countries of Nigeria and Lebanon.

### **Theoretical framework**

As discussed in previous papers in this special issue, identities are constructed in relation to one another through notions of 'sameness' and 'difference'. The following section will discuss how identities are constructed at the intersections of nation and religion amongst youth in the more disadvantaged sections of the multi-religious and post-colonial countries of Nigeria and Lebanon.

A particularly salient identification for young people is national identity. National identity is important because it provides a space of collective belonging, and in its conjunction with the nation-state a set of rights and privileges accorded to citizens (Ahmed, 1999). In this way, the construction and maintenance of the nation is particularly central to the lives of youth living within fragile contexts. However, as all nations are comprised of diverse individuals and groups, the nation must be collectively imagined through the construction of an authentic, shared culture and an official national memory (Anderson, 1991). This is accomplished through the construction and regulation of national narratives (e.g. shared history, kinship, culture, etc.), symbols and the regular and repetitive performance of nationalized ritual, which are circulated both through formal educational institutions (such as the school) and non-formal educational networks (such as the family, political organisations and religious institutions) in society (Fincham, 2012). Through these performances of banal

nationalism, and engagement of the affective, the minds and hearts of 'citizens' are shaped on a day-to-day basis, and an imaginary coherence is imposed on youth experiences (Billig, 1995).

Religion and ethnicity are important boundary markers in the context of nation-building. Both are social constructs which function to unite, organize and mobilize individuals within a specific context and for a specific purpose, such as nationalism. Additionally, both ethnic and religious identities attempt to trace themselves 'back' to a specific place (e.g. Mecca), time (e.g. antiquity) and ancestor(s) (e.g. The Prophet Mohamed) in order to "derive an ideological lineage and to provide a guide for future actions" (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 756). In this way, both identities position individuals within temporalities that extend beyond their immediate lives and so provide a sense of continuity. . Furthermore, ethnic and religious identities often overlap, which means that it is not always clear whether people are organizing based on shared attachments to religion or ethnicity (e.g. Sunni Muslim religious identity forms the core of Arab ethnic identity) (Stewart, 2009). Therefore, individuals unite and act on the basis of both of these identities at different times and in different situations.

However, the relationship between these two identity constructs is quite complex, as ethnic and religious identities do not always conveniently and neatly align (e.g. southern Nigerians who are Muslim and northern Nigerians who are Christian; non-Sunni Muslim faiths in the Arab world, such as the Shi'a). Moreover, people often have shifting attachments to one particular identity position within a particular context. For example, individuals can be interpellated and mobilized under a single religious umbrella despite there being many ethnic differences between them (e.g. Muslim northern Nigerians). On the other hand, adherents of the same religion can also be mobilized into conflicting groups based on the 'difference' of ethnicity (e.g. Arab and Persian Shi'a).

Moreover, when conflicts related to political, social or economic inequalities are discursively framed as religious, they are given 'divine sanction', and supporters come to believe they are doing 'God's will' by attacking the evil 'other'. This is particularly salient in Nigeria and Lebanon where groups (such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Hezbollah in Lebanon), have framed their claims to specific territory and defended their (para)military actions against 'others' as 'holy war' or jihad (Harik, 2004). In addition, politicization and mobilization of religious identities are more likely in contexts of religious discrimination and entrenched inequalities (Stewart, 2009). A relevant example of this is how the historic marginalization and persecution of Shi'a Muslims in south Lebanon encouraged the strengthening of religious identities in this community. This ultimately took a political form and led to the creation of the Amal and Hezbollah political/ paramilitary organizations (Harik 2004; Nasr, 2006).



It is important to reiterate here the importance of context and contextual history, as particular identities have been shaped by colonial histories. As discussed previously, the ostensibly unified nations (Nigeria, Lebanon) have been sutured together in ways that were not necessarily informed by a shared national imaginary. Consequently, youth may appropriate and perform their identities with respect to multiple axes of differentiation that have been flattened in the formation of the nation-state.

The section below discusses how the research on Muslim youth identity construction and negotiation was conducted within the country contexts of Nigeria and Lebanon.

### **The research**

The research that informs this paper was part of a larger empirical study looking at the construction and negotiation of Muslim youth identities in four country contexts in the Global South – Pakistan, Senegal, Nigeria and Lebanon (Dunne, Durrani, Fincham and Crossouard, 2017). Given that our aim was to privilege youth voices in an in-depth way, an interpretivist qualitative approach to the research was adopted. Our main source of data was focus group discussions with youth lasting approximately 1.5 hours each. In each country context, the interview sample was constructed by convening sex-segregated and religiously segregated focus groups of between 4 and 6 participants with male and female and Muslim and Christian youth. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to support the discussions with the participants across the case studies. Focus groups were supported by observations in the research context, including observations of the interview processes as well as the wider setting. In order to gain a fuller appreciation of the background of the focus group participants, a questionnaire was developed, which probed bio-data such as nationality, ethnicity, religion and sect, main languages spoken, region of origin and the region in which the youth currently resided. It also probed family background (i.e. asking information about mothers and fathers). The bio-data questionnaire was translated into Hausa (Nigeria) and Arabic (Lebanon) and orally explained as relevant for the different case study contexts.

The fieldwork phase of the research was conducted mainly during the later months of 2014. In the case of Nigeria, focus group discussions were conducted in two phases—a piloting phase in 2011–2012 and the main data collection phase completed in early 2014. The identification of the main research sites in each country context was largely done with the support of the local contacts of the UK-based lead researchers. As educational institutions tended to be the main point of access to youth, focus group interviews were carried out in the institutional contexts of schools or higher education. Where possible, we also sought to include youth who were out of education and

convened separate focus group discussion with these youth respondents. These 'out-of-education' youth were a mix of those employed in the formal or informal sector, underemployed or unemployed. The rationale for this distinction was that in contexts where school life expectancy is low (Nigeria), access to youth through education would tend to include those of higher socio-economic status. However, this was not possible in Lebanon, where the levels of educational uptake and retention are significantly higher than in Nigeria (for more detail refer to the Introduction of this special issue).

Focus group discussions were supported by local researchers in each context, either by involving them alongside the lead UK-based researcher or sometimes in conducting the interviews independently. The rationale for including local researchers is that they could be assumed not to be positioned as 'other' on national, religious, or in some cases, ethnic grounds. Similarly, local youth researchers (Nigeria) could be assumed not to be positioned as 'other' by the respondents in terms of generational differences. In the face of multiple potential axes of positional difference, in most contexts it was possible to match the researchers with the respondent groups in terms of religion and gender (e.g. focus group discussions with female youth led by female researchers, etc.). The aim of this matching was to allow respondents more freedom to engage with sensitive issues within a non-threatening environment. A reflective diary was kept by the researchers to record informal observations and responses to interview encounters. Where possible, interviews were recorded and, if needed, later translated into English. All focus group data was transcribed, and the data was analysed through thematic coding using a poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist theoretical lens.

The sections below discuss how Muslim youth appropriate, perform and/ or contest their identities in relation to national unity, regional difference and ethnicity within the context of the multi-religious states of Nigeria and Lebanon.

### **National unity and external others**

At the outset, it must be noted that all youth interviewed for this research are, in official terms, citizens of their respective countries. This technical description is important to highlight as we compare and contrast it to the affective senses of belonging in which youth in both contexts strain to make nation and religion coherent in their expressions of identity.

In focus group discussions, youth in both Nigeria and Lebanon expressed strong attachments to their nation. National 'myths' constructed with reference to particular colonial histories provided affirmation of national unity and a sense of discursive cohesion (however contingent and fragile) across multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities in both countries. For the youth, national pride was constructed upon notions of national superiority in relation to 'European others' with reference to essentialised personal/national characteristics and collective behaviours. For Nigerian youth, 'Nigerian-ness' (as distinctive from European-ness) was largely constructed in relation to positive personal/collective attributes, such as kindness, generosity, hospitality, and friendliness. For Muslim youth, this sense of unity referred predominantly to the importance of religion to most Nigerians. As one (Sunni) Muslim male youth explained:

*To me I am proud to a Nigerian because Nigerians are very religious people, in terms of their faith, either Muslims or Christians, they are very religious.*

Similarly, for young Shi'a Muslims in Lebanon, 'Lebanese-ness' was largely understood through cultural narratives constructed upon notions of national superiority to Europeans in relation to 'tradition' and 'modernity'. For example, when asked what it meant to be Lebanese, youth often used traditional cultural values to construct both 'sameness' between Lebanese, and 'difference' between Lebanese and Europeans. As one (Shi'a) Muslim female youth stated:

*Our traditions, generosity and hospitality to others. Family bonds do not exist among foreigners. Lebanese help their neighbours. We feel the pain and joy of our neighbours.*

In both country contexts, national pride was also constructed upon notions of national superiority in relation to essentialised personal/national characteristics and collective behaviours with reference to 'regional others'. In the case of Nigerian youth, the superiority of Nigeria and Nigerians was discursively claimed and substantiated in relation to 'other' Africans. As one Christian female youth explained:

*When I say I am a Nigerian, I define myself as somebody who is from a part of the African continent where every other black person looks up to as in other countries in Africa they look up to Nigeria for a lot things that's why they seem to call us the giant of Africa so when I say I am a Nigeria it carries a lot of weight.*

Similarly, for Lebanese Shi'a youth, 'Lebanese-ness' was constructed in relation to essentialised personal/national characteristics of 'difference' between Lebanese and 'other' Arabs. One (Shi'a) Muslim male youth explained it this way:

*Our openness, acceptance of new things and modern life. We travel. We learn everything quickly. We are educated and love science more than other Arabs. All Lebanese are smart. We speak more than one language (Arabic, English and French). We are like Italians. They are stylish and dress to impress, like us. All the world love Lebanese and they imitate them.*

Of particular mention was the youths' understanding of religious tolerance as a key marker of national character (see also discussion in paper on Cosmopolitanism in this special issue). For example, Nigerian youth offered the country's 'soft secularism' and their freedom to practice any religion as a point of contrast between Nigeria and other African nations. As one (Sunni) Muslim male youth explained:

*My nationality as Nigerian permits me to practice any religion and to practice my culture the way I like it.*

Moreover, despite Lebanon's long history of sectarian strife, the youth understood 'religious tolerance' to be one of the key signifiers of Lebanon's national character. As one (Shi'a) Muslim male youth explained:

*Lebanon is the connection point between East and West. We respect other religions and sects. Lebanon is a lesson in cohesion among faiths. Lebanese have freedom to believe in God as we like. We are the only country in the Arab world that has a Christian president.*

Interestingly, youth in both countries credited religious tolerance with being a main reason for the peaceful co-existence of their large ethnically and religiously diverse populations.

In both country contexts, the youth expressed tremendous pride in the strength of their armed forces and used it as a foundation on which to construct their sense of superiority over 'others' within the region. A particular source of pride for Nigerian youth was the role the Nigerian armed forces in peacekeeping missions on the African continent. As one Christian male youth explained:

*One of those things that made Nigeria distinctive is the role that the Nigerian government has played in terms of peacekeeping and emancipating other African nations from colonial dominations, from apartheid regime and contributing in terms of other nations to stabilize economically. So ... other nationalities in Africa [to] see Nigerians as big brothers and sisters ... at the level of governance [that] Nigeria has actually contributed more than any other African nation to the liberation of other sister nations.*

Moreover, Lebanese youth acknowledged that the one experience which unifies all Lebanese, regardless of religious sect is the history of conflict between Lebanon and Israel. This was

particularly salient for Shi'a youth, as the greatest portion of the Shi'a population in Lebanon live in the areas bordering Israel. Within this context, Lebanon's (para)military accomplishments were seen by the youth as a source of pride and were credited with being a significant national unifying factor. As one (Shi'a) Muslim male youth stated:

*Lebanese history is distinctive. We rejected the Israeli enemy and we saved our country. Everyone has sacrificed something for this country. My cousin is a shaheed (martyr). He shed his precious blood for his country. We have the duty to defend Lebanon and resist the Israeli enemy.*

Although youth in both country contexts expressed tremendous national pride, ruptures began to appear in youths' narratives of national superiority when discussing politics and governance. For Nigerian youth, this was particularly in relation to their dissatisfaction and disappointment with the workings of the Nigerian State and politicians' failure to deliver on their promises. Although Nigerian youth expressed strong commitment to democratic values, these disappointments with governance haunted the positive youth imaginaries of their nation. On the other hand, Lebanese youth expressed frustration that their country had been without a government for almost 3 years due to bureaucratic paralysis brought on by sectarian partisanship.

The section above discusses how both in Nigeria and Lebanon, as multi-ethnic and multi-religious states, unifying national imaginaries have offered discursive cohesion and stability within the context of diversity. On the other hand, these have been balanced by strategies that provide operational and political equilibrium, including the use of different legal codes (legal pluralism) and constitutional or extraconstitutional concessions to support power-sharing between groups (e.g. the notional alternation of presidential office by region/religion in Nigeria; the 'confessionalist' system of governance in Lebanon). Moreover, these arrangements have created parallel traditions of citizenship with contradictory boundaries of belonging.

The complexities of the Nigerian and Lebanese contexts mean that youth in these countries must navigate multiple discursive intersections - nation, religion, ethnicity (and gender) - in order to shape their own identities. The sections below discuss the ways in which regional and ethnic difference have created fractures in 'unifying' national identity narratives and helped to construct 'internal others'.

### **Regional difference and internal others**

In both country contexts, regional belonging has emerged as a prominent symbolic structure of internal 'othering'. Moreover, in the two country contexts, regional identity has largely been

mapped and articulated through religion. This historic regional / religious affiliation has fractured youth imaginings of the unified nation.

In the Nigerian context, a dominant discursive axis taken up by Nigerian youth to frame their identities was a region–religion dyad of Northern Muslims and Southern Christians (a simplification even if it is very commonly articulated). The conflation of region and religion (Northern Muslim—Southern Christian) worked to highlight the divisions of land and people that pre-date the production of Nigeria. The flattening of local ethnic affiliations and distinctions through regionalism emerged as a result of historical British investments in northern religious leaders, which encouraged an emphasis on religious identity. These regional-religious differences describe the fractures of post-colonial Nigeria, and it was these lines of difference from internal others that were most sharply described in the youth discussions of their identities. As one (Sunni) Muslim male youth stated:

*Actually, there are a lot of problems between the North and South. It is in the history that since the Biafran war the southerners (Igbo) have it in mind that they are non-Nigerians up till now. They regard themselves and citizens of Biafran country because at this particular point in time, especially during this democratic period, the Northerners do not want the Southerners to rule them while the Southerners do not want Northerners to rule them. This is because of the regional differences between us. So my own observation, we are living like the 'yam and palm oil' (a Hausa saying used in describing a distrustful relationship), we are living together but our minds are not clear. More especially during this insurgency, if you go to the South they think you are Boko Haram. They will call you Boko Haram straight forward.*

Similarly, Lebanon is a country plagued by significant regional inequalities linked to nation-state formation. Historically, the Shi'a (like the Sunnis and the Druze) were not a party to the establishment of Greater Lebanon by French colonial rulers. Rather, through the annexation of their territory to Lebanon, the Shi'a became citizens of a new state which they identified with (Christian) Maronite hegemony and Western imperialism. After Lebanon's independence and the establishment of the 1943 National Pact between the Maronite and Sunni elites, the Shi'a experience remained largely one of alienation and impoverishment, including poor political representation. In contemporary times, areas populated by Shi'a Muslims (south Beirut, south Lebanon and the Beqa'a Valley) are far more likely to be disadvantaged. In terms of education, the geographic distribution of quality schools has tended to be concentrated around Beirut and the northern areas of the country, which are predominantly populated by Christians and Sunni Muslims. Moreover, illiteracy rates are higher in the Beqa'a Valley and South Lebanon, which have

predominately Shi'a populations (Frayha 2009). As a result, a dominant discursive axis taken up by Lebanese youth to frame their identities is a region–religion dyad of Northern Christians/Sunni and Southern Shi'a. As one (Shi'a) Muslim female youth explained:

*Christians achieve higher positions in Lebanon. They can work wherever they want. Good jobs are usually reserved for Christians in the government. It's easier for a woman who doesn't wear a hijab (Sunni or Shi'a) to get a job. A woman who wears a hijab cannot enter the army or work in a bank or work as a flight attendant.*

In both country contexts, regional/religious distinction was also used to bolster the 'authenticity' of the religious practices of Muslims, and particular kinds of Muslims in relation to 'internal others'. While Muslim youth generally invoked a discourse of religious universalism (i.e. Islamic *umma*), they articulated and performed their identities within local social relations which produced regional distinctions from 'internal others'.

In Nigeria regional differences were used to bolster the 'authenticity' of the religious practices of Northern Muslims in relation to their Southern counterparts. This was accomplished through the derision of Southerners, especially Muslims, for their Westernisation, loss of culture and syncretic forms of Islam, in opposition to the superior and more 'pure' Islamic identity and practice of Northern Muslims. This precipitated an internal hierarchy in which Muslims in the South and especially Yoruba Muslims were constructed as not quite 'proper' Muslims. As one (Sunni) Muslim female youth explained:

*They (Yoruba Muslims from the south) value culture more than religion. It's just ignorance of religion. Before it was like that (in the north), now it is changing.*

Moreover, northern Muslim youth claimed that their observation of other Islamic contexts (i.e. Saudi Arabia) and communications with youth from elsewhere through ICT had influenced their social and cultural relations and produced shifts especially with regard to a religious consciousness and practices. This contributed to a sense of a 'proper' Islamic practice against syncretic or more hybrid forms of Islam. The idea of a 'proper' or a received form of Islam from Saudi Arabia was used to reassert the regional difference by 'othering' Muslims in the South. As a (Sunni) Muslim male youth explained:

*If Abdul (a Muslim) is from southern part of Nigeria, if he comes to north ... some Muslims do not accept them as good brothers and sisters. .... some northerners will think that your religion is not as perfect as his (northerner) religion.*

Similarly, regional/religious distinction was used by Muslim Lebanese youth to bolster the 'authenticity' of the religious practices of particular kinds of Muslims (i.e. Shi'a) in relation to 'internal others' (who for them are the Sunni). As one (Shi'a) Muslim male youth remarked:

*We are better believers. We stick to the original meaning of the Qu'ran. Other Muslims have changed it. Sunnis don't acknowledge the 12 imams. They don't follow the complete Islam. Shi'a have fatwas (religious decrees) from well-educated and established ayatollahs, but for the Sunni, any street boy can study for two years and they start giving fatwas in shedding people's blood. If I were a Sunni, I would live in Saudi Arabia, be an extremist and follow Sunni politicians despite their corruption. Their weak leaders (such as Saad Hariri) take a 'selfie' (photo) and spread their message. Hassan Nasrallah (leader of Hezbollah) would never do that. They have no honour. They are ignorant and primitive. Saudi is a backward country full of terrorists.*

Shi'a youth in Lebanon also spoke of a 'proper' or received form of Islam from Iran, which was used to reassert regional difference by 'othering' Sunni Muslims more generally, and urban Shi'a Muslims in Lebanon in particular. As one (Shi'a) Muslim female youth put it:

*Iran is more conservative than Lebanon. The most conservative communities are in Iran and Iraq. Shi'a in Europe don't pray or follow the rules. Shi'a in South Lebanon are different than those in Beirut. We are more committed. Families in Beqa'a Valley are more conservative than others.*

In other words, the youths' narratives revealed Shi'a youth identities to be highly context-dependent and mediated through other discourses, such as location, culture, ethnicity and politics.

The section below discusses the ways in which ethnic difference has created fractures in 'unifying' national identity narratives and helped to construct 'internal others'.

## **Ethnicity**

Within the contexts of Nigeria and Lebanon, national identities are powerfully infused with historical traces related to internal fractures originating in colonial times and struggles for independence. In both country contexts, colonial powers drew up state boundaries in very arbitrary ways without regard for existing community affiliations (e.g. ethnicity). Moreover, in the interest of 'divide and conquer', colonial subjects in these countries were differentiated based on ethnicity and religion, with some groups being privileged and other groups being disadvantaged by colonial authorities. In contemporary times, these social divisions among national citizens constructed during colonialism



and sustained in the aftermath have produced fractures in national identity narratives, challenging the notion of a unified national imaginary.

In Nigeria, ethnicity is a particularly key axis of identity. On the one hand, ethnic diversity was used by the youth to mark out Nigerian distinctiveness and to substantiate the idea of Nigerian national unity and cohesion in contrast to other African countries which experience ethnic conflict, such as Sudan, Congo and Somalia. As one (Sunni) Muslim male youth explained:

*We have more than 20 tribes and we are living peacefully. We don't have this problem of this ethnic... I am from Kilba, I am from Bachama. You can go to a house and find out that this room is a Kilba, another one is Bachama, another group is Fulani and they are living peacefully, their children are eating, playing and doing everything together.*

On the other hand, Nigerian youth narratives reveal how religion/ethnicity/region intersect in complex ways that reinscribe the cleavages that Nigeria's foundation papered over. An example of this are the Igbo, one of the three major ethnic/language groups predominant in South-East Nigeria. They are known as successful business people who have migrated to many parts of Nigeria. Predominantly Christian and Catholic, the Igbo are remembered for their favoured status under British colonial rule and the Biafran War when they sought secession from post-independence Nigeria and garnered support from the Catholic Church in these efforts. Without land claims in the North, the shakiness of their Nigerian affiliation (Biafra), their religion (Catholic) and the way they have migrated for business and live in the towns and cities of the North have produced a revulsion against the Igbo for northern Muslim youth. The Igbo were often cited by northern Muslim research respondents as the most reviled ethnic group and the least favoured alternative ethnicity. As one (Sunni) male youth explained:

*We are forced to live together. Originally, we are not identical in any way whatsoever, by culture, religion and what have you. ... After the amalgamation we also had a breakdown during the military regime – coup, counter coup which finally led to a civil war.*

This is an example of how the youth recruited ethnicity to demarcate regional differences that reflected the forging of the nation-state in which the north, dominated by Hausa/Fulani Muslims, amalgamated with the Christian south which comprised largely of the Igbo in the South-East and the Yoruba of the South-West. While local ethnicities are tolerated in local areas, ethnic divides among the major groups from which the nation was formed still hold sway and are explained largely in reference to religion.

Just as in Nigeria, the boundaries of the modern state of Lebanon were carved out by European powers (the French) without regard for existing communal affiliations and attachments. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) partitioned the former empire's Arabic-speaking provinces into zones under British control and influence (modern-day Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan and Israel/Palestine) and those under the control and influence of France (modern-day Syria and Lebanon). Because the distinction between nations was political rather than social (in the interests of European powers rather than local communities), modern Lebanese share much in common with their geographical neighbours in terms of shared ethnicity and culture. In this way, several of the signifiers of 'Lebanese' identity mentioned by the youth in focus group discussions are actually common to the region (Arabic language, Arab ethnicity, regional history and cuisine). Thus, in contrast to Nigeria, where ethnic diversity has challenged national unity, in Lebanon shared ethnicity with other Arabs has problematised the notion of a distinct 'Lebanese' nation set apart from its neighbours in the region.

Although Lebanon is ethnically homogenous (Arab), ethnic divides among Lebanese are largely expressed with reference to religion. Religious communities in Lebanon have distinct cultural signifiers (e.g. 'Christian' foods, such as escargot, are considered to be *haram*<sup>1</sup> and are not eaten by Muslims). Moreover, Christians/Sunni/Shi'a/Druze in Lebanon all have identifiable accents and use different expressions when they speak Arabic. There is also little intermarriage between religious communities within the country. In this way, internal cultural segmentation centred around religion works to challenge unified notions of 'Lebanese-ness' and to blur boundaries of the nation.

## Conclusions

In multi-ethnic and multireligious states like Nigeria and Lebanon, national 'myths' provide affirmation of national unity and a sense of discursive cohesion (however contingent and fragile). Within these myths, national pride and allegiance is constructed around essentialised personal/national characteristics and performances / practice of identification, as well as notions of national superiority recited in relation to 'external others'.

However, within postcolonial states, national identities are powerfully infused with historical traces related to their formation and emergence as nation-states. These produce internal fractures originating in colonial times and struggles for independence. Colonial powers drew up state boundaries in seemingly very arbitrary ways without regard for existing community affiliations. Moreover, in the interest of 'divide and conquer', colonial subjects were often differentiated by

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<sup>1</sup> Forbidden in Islam

ethnicity and religion, with colonial authorities privileging some groups while disadvantaging others. In this way, religion and region have been intertwined, religious 'others' have been constructed, and history and socio-political dynamics have been deeply implicated in producing allegiances/differences, and modern national affiliations may, or may not, coincide with modern nation-state boundaries.

In contemporary times, fractures in national identity narratives constructed as a legacy of colonial times have been exacerbated and/or complimented by mass migration and ICT (e.g. through the construction of 'authentic' forms of Islam received from abroad), which has further challenged the notion of a unified imagined national community. It has also put into question the relevance of the nation-state within a globalised world and raised questions about post-national or more cosmopolitan forms of citizenship (as discussed in an earlier paper of this special issue).

On the other hand, as youth share space, culture and politics with 'others' in their geographical locality, it is within the everyday contexts of the local that identities are produced through the revivification of historical differences (them) and allegiances (us). In this way, through the interpenetration of the global and the local, youth identities in the Global South are constantly being reconfigured and rewritten (Bhabha, 2004).

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