Transnational marriage among Ahmadi Muslims in the UK

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Abstract Ahmadi Muslims constitute a reformed sect of Islam founded in 1889 by a charismatic leader, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. In this article I explore the character and processes of transnational marriage arrangements among Ahmadi Muslims over three generations in the UK. I suggest that the process of conversion to Ahmadiyyat and the organizational structure of Ahmadi mosques have combined to produce a flexible pattern of marriage among Ahmadis that is unusual among South Asians. A significant number of earlier and contemporary Ahmadi marriages are interethnic, reflecting an expansive Ahmadiya identity that is perceived to be independent of ethnicity. Further, analysis of marriage proposals accepted as well as rejected suggests gender differences in perceptions of and motivations for marriage. The analysis suggests that while gender differences in expectations of marriage may have parallels in some other South Asian transnational marriages, Ahmadi religious identity and organization plays a distinctive role in shaping the processes of Ahmadi marriage arrangements.

British Ahmadi marriages are frequently transnational in the narrow sense of entailing the migration of at least one partner from their country of residence to another as a result of marriage. These marriages are also transnational in a wider sense in that that social links are usually reciprocally maintained across international borders after the marriage, often over two or more generations (Faist 2000; Kivisto 2001; Vertovec 1999). Such relationships, facilitated by modern forms of technology, speak of a transnationalism that is as much a mind-set and attitude to place as it is a social practice (Caplan 1988).

In these respects, Ahmadi transnational marriages share many of the characteristics of transnational marriages among other British South Asian Muslim and Punjabi Sikh populations. However, as I go on to argue, the processes of conversion to Ahmadiyyat and the need to incorporate new converts through marriage have resulted in flexible patterns of and attitudes towards marriage that are unusual among South Asians. As Muslims, Ahmadis permit cousin marriages, which account for a small proportion of contemporary marriages. However, the research on which this article is based indicates that the number of cousin marriages is declining among British-born and educated Ahmadis in the UK. By contrast, among British Pakistanis there is local evidence of increased rates of transnational cousin marriage (Shaw 2001) and among Mirpuris cousin...
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Marriage may account for 60 per cent of all marriages (Ballard 2002). Further, although Ahmadis are not compelled to follow exogamous marriage rules, they are nevertheless, like British Punjabi Sikhs, likely to marry non-kin and to find spouses for their well-educated offspring from an increasingly global Ahmadi diaspora. Indeed, as I suggest in this article, British Ahmadi women may be more likely to choose a spouse from the UK or Canada than from Pakistan, but this is not necessarily the case for Ahmadi men. However, unlike other British South Asian populations, the Ahmadis as a community also welcome marriages between different ethnic groups and so contract marriages that are both transnational and interethnic. The only condition for marriage is that both parties to the marriage must be Ahmadi. A further distinction between Ahmadis and other South Asian Muslim communities is that the mosque may play a key role in arranging marriages.

I begin the article with a brief historical and organizational overview of the Ahmadis to contextualize their contemporary marriage patterns and demonstrate the historical precedent for interethnic marriage. I analyse specific cases in which transnational marriages were suggested and refused, or conversely, successfully contracted. I draw on data gathered by interview and by participant-observation, supplemented by printed and electronic materials by and about the Ahmadis, and intend to be suggestive rather than conclusive about current transnational trends.

Data were collected on 66 marriages and of these 30 were transnational in the narrow sense that one spouse, normally resident in one country, migrated to another country as a result of marriage. These marriages were more than one-way migrations in that in all cases, links between two or more nation-states were maintained so that those involved formed transnational communities ‘linked through exchange, reciprocity, and solidarity to achieve a high degree of social cohesion, and a common repertoire of symbolic and collective representation’ (Faist 2000: 208). In addition, in this article I draw on cases of marriages that had been suggested and planned but did not happen; these cases are instructive for the insights they offer into the motivations and expectations that influence contemporary Ahmadi marriage trends.

While most of these data concern Ahmadis of South Asian descent living in the UK, several interviews were conducted in the USA, and a few others via email. The interviewees were well-established in terms of education, professional standing, home ownership and other indicators of economic and social success. They tended to be among the more active members of the mosque. In this sense they may not be fully representative of the total Ahmadi population in Britain today. Genealogical material collected from individuals covered a minimum of four generations and this permitted general trends in migration to be discerned. These data were organized into kinship charts of a standard anthropological form and all the charts included several transnational marriages, frequently over two or more generations.

Origins and organization

Ahmadi Muslims today constitute a transnational population that has its origins in the Punjab in India. While some migrated to Africa three or more generations ago and
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others came further west, their numbers in the UK remained small until 1984 when anti-Ahmadi legislation in Pakistan effectively criminalized their daily lives and religious practices (Gualtieri 1989; Home Office 2004; Hyman 1989). In 1984 the Khalifa, the Ahmadis’ spiritual leader, had no option but to leave Pakistan. He chose to relocate in the UK where a flourishing Ahmadi community had been established in the early decades of the twentieth century and where the national language was one with which the Khalifa and many middle-class Pakistanis were familiar. At this point the Ahmadis, who had always had a transnational, if not frankly global, outlook became essentially a Western-based organization with its roots in the subcontinent. Since 1984 there has been an increase in Ahmadi emigration from Pakistan to the UK and other western countries.

Ahmadi Muslims are members of a reformed sect of Islam founded in 1889 by a charismatic leader, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. From its inception Ahmadiyyat has been ‘one of the most active and controversial movements within modern Islam’ (Friedmann 1989: 1).\(^1\) The seeds of this success were to be found in the organization from the very start, for within a decade of its foundation Ahmadiyya Islam ‘had sufficient membership, pledged to the founder through bai’at (initiation) of a traditional Sufi kind, and centralized through regular fund raising, the publication of journals and the establishment of schools, to justify’ its claim to be a distinct religious community (Powell 2000: 129).

While the Ahmadis may not be quite like the Anglo-Indian ‘transnationals of the mind’ described by Caplan (1998), they too are one of the possible outcomes of cultural interaction in a colonial environment and in that sense ‘an acculturative movement’ that is the product of transnational exchange (Jones 1989: 115ff). Ahmadi missionaries, for example, used the tactics of the Christian missionaries in India against the Christians themselves, and in an explicit move of ‘reverse colonialism’, were sent to the UK and USA in the early twentieth century to convert the Christian populations of those countries to Ahmadiyyat, or ‘the true Islam’.\(^2\) Further, the Ahmadis, in their beliefs and practices combine extreme conservatism with an allegiance to science and rationalism, thereby synthesizing distinct national and cultural heritages into a single new and transnational religious movement (Fisher 1963). The Ahmadis constitute a highly mobile population that simultaneously looks both east and west, is prepared to assimilate, within limits, to the cultures in which it finds itself yet adheres strictly to basic tenets of Islam.

The initial converts to Ahmadiyyat were middle class, largely town-based professionals but within a short time many less educated and more rural people also converted. This resulted in a ‘bipolar’ pattern of conversion (Jones 1989: 119) that makes any homogenizing statement about the origins of the Ahmadis or their general educational attainment before migration to other parts of the world impossible. While many Ahmadis were economic migrants, others migrated as missionaries. As the latter founded new missions the number of Ahmadi communities around the world grew. Nowadays, economic migration to the UK is very difficult for South Asians and some communities can only ‘import’ kin through arranged marriages (Ballard 2001; Shaw 2001). Unlike many South Asian
communities, the Ahmadis, who may use the marriage route to migration, also enter as asylum-seekers.

Many Ahmadis are compelled to seek asylum because of religious persecution based on their belief in the prophethood of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. This has led orthodox Muslims to declare them heretics. It has also suited Pakistan’s political leaders to have a ready internal target for disgruntled and increasingly Islamist sections of the population. However, a large community of Ahmadis continues to live in the Ahmadi city of Rabwah in Pakistan, and many British Ahmadis have kin there. Rabwah, and all it stands for, forms part of the transnational mind-set of Ahmadis everywhere.

Marriage: a flexible arrangement

A precedent for the flexibility of contemporary marriage patterns that distinguishes the Ahmadis from other South Asians can be discerned in narrated accounts of the marriages of those who first converted to Ahmadiyya Islam. These accounts are drawn from detailed interviews with children and grandchildren who heard these marriage stories as part of their family history. If a single woman became an Ahmadi in early twentieth-century India, the immediate personal impact on her life would be that she could not marry a non-Ahmadi and so the usual channels for finding a spouse within a *biradari* or *zat* (extended kin group) were no longer available to her. If such a woman were already married she might find her husband unwilling to convert with her and unwilling to keep her as an Ahmadi. The result was that those who had already become Ahmadis would arrange suitable marriages, or remarriages, for these women thereby helped them to find a place in an Ahmadi social network. In this way the honour of women was protected, and the faith strengthened both in the present and future through children born to these converts. Flexibility in choice of marriage partner was thus, in part, a product of necessity.

If a man converted to Ahmadiyyat his family position would be a good predictor of how many others would convert with him. A senior well-respected man would be able to bring not only his own immediate kin into Ahmaddiyat but also brothers and their families. Others, perhaps younger or less influential, might convert as individuals and persuade only their wives to convert with them. As a result, extended families were often divided into Sunni and Ahmadi branches, which mostly ceased to intermarry.

British Ahmadis today do not feel obliged to choose spouses for their children based on *biradari* or other (stereo)typically South Asian grounds. Of course, Ahmadis can and do marry among kin and find spouses for their children who are from the same regional or linguistic background as themselves but these are never cited as primary considerations in the choice of a son/daughter-in-law (Shaw 2001). More interesting still is the openness to interethnic, often also transnational, marriages found among Ahmadis in the UK. Ahmadis are evangelizers for the faith and proselytize whenever and wherever possible. Often new converts are single and relatively well-educated. Once converted, the mosque and the Ahmadi social network will help to arrange a marriage for the convert and so secure her or him within
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mutually reinforcing and supporting Ahmadi links. So where shared cultural background is often a prerequisite for a marriage within many South Asian communities, the only condition the Ahmadis explicitly state and always cite for accepting a marriage is that the ‘outsider’ be Ahmadi and therefore, in religious terms, not an outsider at all. Maintaining ethnic group endogamy, which is a central consideration in many South Asian arranged marriages and is taken to be a ‘key feature in the long-term maintenance of transnational networks’, is not a primary concern (Ballard 2001: 46). In fact, given that the long-term goal is to convert the world to Ahmaddiyat, such inward-looking and self-limiting marriage practices would only delay the inevitable global victory. The Ahmadi endogamy of faith not only maintains transnational networks but also helps develop new ones and so spreads the faith.

As if to underline this last point, while other South Asian communities accept interethnic marriages for a minority, often on condition that the in-marrying outsider conforms to family and group ideals in terms of education, income and looks (‘tall and fair’), the Ahmadis seem to make a point of publicly supporting marriages of a very different kind. Examples from West Africa and Australia illustrate this point. Pakistani Ahmadi missionaries in West Africa, who were figures of religious authority, married local women and thereby led by example (Fisher 1963: 150). A 1994 Ahmadi souvenir brochure includes a photograph of the Australian Khan family. The legend reads: ‘The first fruit of the mosque … Mrs Khan is the first Aboriginal person to accept Ahmadiyyat’ (Ahmadiya Muslim Association 1994: 46). Although the photograph does not make it explicit, it is highly likely, given the relatively recent establishment of an Ahmadi community in Australia, that Mr Khan was not born in Australia and this marriage is both interethnic and transnational.

Such interethnic and transnational marriages constitute only a minority of all Ahmadi marriages, but one final example is a contemporary British Ahmadi case of Nadia. Nadia is 45 years old and one of seven sisters and a brother. Five sisters have university degrees, two of them doctorates, and three have married converts. One of Nadia’s brothers-in-law is a white German citizen who converted to Ahmadiyyat in Israel and married a sister who had read Hebrew at university. This couple has recently moved from California to Israel where the husband now works for the United Nations. Another sister is married to a white English convert. The third brother-in-law converted from a Christian Goan family. Nadia’s only brother is married to a Russian convert. This family is exceptional, with four of the eight siblings marrying converts and with three of these marriages being both interethnic and transnational.

Even if it could be shown that Ahmadis and other South Asian communities contract the same proportion of interethnic marriages, evidently the processes that lead to such marriages, which include the desire to integrate converts to the faith, are distinctive to Ahmaddiyat.

The organization of contemporary Ahmadi transnational marriages

The organizational structure of the Ahmadis means that besides being organized through family networks, marriages may also be arranged through the mosque. As
outlined above, contemporary Ahmadi transnational marriage patterns combine features already noted for other South Asian communities. Like British Sikhs, many Ahmadis are well-educated with access to professional international networks where marriages may be arranged and for whom spouses do not have to be sought within a limited kin-defined group. However, as Muslims, Ahmadis permit cousin marriages, and most marriages are arranged for the partners in their early to mid-twenties, which is younger than the norm for the British population. Ahmadi women mostly veil in public and often work part-time or interrupt careers to raise families, which tend to be larger than the British average. The combination of accepting consanguineous and also more broadly-based marriages maximizes choice of spouse in a globalized social network where social mobility is just one factor in the pragmatic decision-making that takes place for each marriage. The marriage network is often defined by social interactions at the mosque and, in this respect, the Ahmadi organization itself is transnational in a way that is unique among Muslims.

There is a central mosque, located wherever the Khalifa is resident, and all mosques around the world send information to and receive instruction from this centre. The Ahmadi mosque network is designed, in fact, rather like the ancient Roman colonies where each new colony replicated the form and structure of the imperial centre, a kind of Rome away from Rome. By contrast, in most other Muslim communities mosques do not share any organizational structure or necessarily combine to present a uniform approach to matters Islamic. Indeed, they may often work as rivals to each other and have congregations that are ethnically distinct from each other.

Ahmadi mosques provide a religious, social and recreational environment in which, unusually for Muslims, women are expected to attend in equal numbers as men. Every Ahmadi mosque has a uniform organizational structure with women’s and men’s committees and youth organizations for girls and boys. Committee membership rotates by election. Each country has a national women’s and a men’s president and an annual timetable of functions to bring the community together. In each country each region also has a local women’s and men’s president and associated committees. The mosques are ‘greedy institutions’ that depend on the voluntary work of their members and many individuals devote long hours to mosque functions. Such volunteering, expected of all members according to their capacities, provides individuals with a ready network of acquaintances and social interactions that regularly result in the establishment of marriage networks extending beyond kin connections and that are often also transnational in nature. Any Ahmadi migrating from one country to another can simply offer to volunteer in a mosque and join an instantly recognizable organization with familiar rituals and events. Such organizational conformity facilitates transnational movement and provides a strong sense of an integrated community, which, to answer the questions posed by Guarnizo and Smith about the practical modalities of transnational network construction, fosters ‘principles of trust and solidarity … across national territories’, provides the ‘discourses and practices’ to hold the networks in place, organizes ‘social closure and control across borders to guarantee loyalty and curtail malfeasance’ and puts in place ‘the sociocultural basis supporting transnational relations and ties’ (in Ballard 2001: 8). Some of the
sociocultural basis is reinforced by the technology available to the Ahmadis. This includes the global Muslim Television Ahmadiya (MTA), which produces some of the time/space compression declared to be an aspect of transnationalism and is a means of communication for 'communities without propinquity' (Faist 2000: 208).4

For many Ahmadis migration from the periphery to the metropolitan centre offered opportunities for educational advance and financial reward not as readily available in the home country. Marriage patterns for earlier generations correspondingly show that those established in the UK married spouses in Pakistan who then migrated westwards. This was the most common form of transnational marriage for people who are now in the ‘grandparent’ generation. While interviewees overwhelmingly stated that the cultural expectation is for women to move to their husband’s home on marriage, it is clear from actual migration patterns that if the wife is based in the UK the husband leaves his home to join her. However, marriage to a British-based spouse was not always merely a ticket to the UK. For example, I came across the example of an unmarried doctor who already had official permission from the British government to work in the country. He asked his family to find him a bride who was already living in Britain. In this case the marriage was not a route to migration but a way of establishing a family with a woman who would not have simultaneously to deal with leaving her natal family and also her country of residence. Today, a popular marriage route is from the UK to Canada and, here again, if a woman is Canadian her British husband is more likely to migrate to join her. In these instances migration westwards takes priority over the gender norm that expects women to move on marriage. It is also clear that as a significant Ahmadi population has established itself in the UK, the need for spouses from abroad is not as pressing as it once was. More British-born people are marrying each other and there is a large enough local community for this to be possible.

Limits to transnational marriages: place and gender among UK Ahmadis

Against this outline of trends in Ahmadi transnational marriage, in this section I consider some specific marriages and mosque-organized proposals that failed to materialize for what they reveal about the motivations for contemporary transnational Ahmadi marriages and the limits to the transnational reach of such marriages. Understanding why particular transnational marriage proposals are refused offers us insights into the motivations for marriage that may be more revealing than attempts to quantify the frequency of transnational marriages. The first two cases discussed here – Ahmad and Naila – concern British Ahmadis with kin in Pakistan and well-established transnational networks linking Britain and Pakistan: in both cases, the British partner was asked to consider marriage to a Pakistani first cousin. The first case concerns a transnational first-cousin marriage proposed by relatives that never took place.

Ahmad, who had spent time in Pakistan with his extended family, chose not to marry his Pakistani cousin citing possible genetic disabilities in offspring for his decision. His reasoning, the result of imbibing British attitudes to cousin marriage, or
the statement that marrying a first cousin is ‘like marrying a sister’, is repeatedly heard among younger British Ahmadis. In this case, the transnational marriage was not pursued and Ahmad suggested a local marriage with the sister of his best friend. This marriage transformed friendship into kinship while relations with family in Pakistan continue as before and the usual forms of transnational social reciprocity remain in place.

The second case concerns a transnational marriage arranged by the families of the intended spouses that did not happen. The couple had agreed to the marriage and all arrangements were in place when the woman finally decided, just days before the marriage was due to be celebrated, that she did not want to go through with it. Naila is well-educated and intent on pursuing a professional career. Her Pakistani cousin was less educated and Naila felt that the cultural and educational differences between herself and her cousin would diminish the likelihood of a successful marriage. Despite family attempts to persuade her to change her mind, Naila persisted in her decision and the marriage was called off. She later married a local man in the same profession as herself. The Pakistani cousin went on to make a transnational marriage to another British Ahmadi.

An intention to marry someone who has also grown up in Britain is widespread among Ahmadis born and raised in the UK, but does not fully explain contemporary marriage patterns. My informants cite the educational successes of Ahmadi women in the UK as a major factor fuelling a trend for British Ahmadi men to find wives in Pakistan. British Ahmadi men consider Pakistani women to be not quite as Western, less well-educated and with lower aspirations than their British peers. The British men use established transnational social networks to find Pakistani wives who then migrate to the UK. However, these marriages between British men and Pakistani women mean that it is becoming more difficult for some British Ahmadi women, particularly the well-educated over twenty-fives, to marry.

The Rishte (marriage, literally ‘proposal’ or ‘match’) Office at the mosque has now stepped in to try to find a solution to this problem. Until very recently the office was considered a place of last resort for those whose kin and social networks had failed to find marriage partners for them. However, the recent success of this office in finding matches for women over 25, some of whom are divorced, has begun to change community perceptions. All the marriages that have been agreed are between British-resident Ahmadis. Here, therefore, the perceived problem resulting from the decision of some Ahmadi men to marry transnationally has led to the mosque interceding to facilitate local marriages for some Ahmadi women. This suggests a possible gender-based distinction in who marries transnationally and this in turn is informed by the level of education and acculturation of the women and men in specific local contexts as well as their access to transnational networks.

Another example of mosque-level intervention in match-making suggests that being an Ahmadi is not always enough when it comes to marriage and that local ethnic, gender and cultural issues play a role in the decisions made by individuals about their marriages. This case concerns the experience of black American Ahmadis and is also an example of the way in which different diasporas may intersect or clash
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with each other within a religious movement. In the USA the first contact of many converts to Islam is through the Ahmadis (Turner 1988). In New York Walbridge and Haneef (1999) describe one Ahmadi mosque that was, for a period, predominantly a black American site of religious worship. As South Asian migration increased after 1984, South Asians began to take over the committees running the mosque. This led to tension and the departure of a significant number of black American men from the mosque. The result was that many of the remaining black American women were unable to find spouses within the community (Walbridge and Haneef 1999). The Khalifah intervened and a number of Pakistani Ahmadi men willing to move to the USA to marry the black American women were identified. In this instance, a local shortage of suitable men was tackled institutionally by suggesting transnational marriages that would have led to the migration of South Asian men to the USA, once again reversing gender norms in a general westward migration pattern. However, the women in New York did not take up the offer of the Pakistani spouses, citing cultural differences as justification (Walbridge and Haneef 1999).

In these examples of transnational marriages, arranged at individual and institutional levels, and regardless of whether they are refused or successfully contracted, the trends suggest that women and men currently make choices differently. British men are more likely to agree to marry a Pakistani wife and British women tend to be more concerned about finding spouses with common local cultural and career aspirations. This gendered concern appears to be one that British women share with their black American counterparts. It does not mean that women do not make transnational marriages; it may simply mean that for some women transnational marriages may be contracted with men of Western ethnic origins who have converted rather than with Pakistan-based Ahmadis.

While the Ahmadi population of the world is growing, is increasingly ethnically diverse and values interethnic and transnational marriages, local individuals may, because of their personal circumstances and interests, choose not to make certain types of transnational marriages while accepting others. The gender and country of residence of the individual in each case appears to be a reasonable predictor of decision-making relating to marriage in a transnational context.

Conclusion

Conversion to Ahmadiyyat and the organizational structure of Ahmadi mosques have combined to produce a flexible pattern of marriage among Ahmadis that is unusual among South Asians. The first unusual feature of these marriages is that a significant proportion of them are interethnic, reflecting an expansive Ahmadiya identity that is perceived to be independent of ethnicity, and which can be understood with reference to the origins and political context of the Ahmadiya movement.

The cases of British Ahmadi marriages discussed here also indicate gendered differences in the expectations of a marriage that are linked with social class and place of residence, and that seem to be placing limits on certain forms of transnational marriages. While these gender differences in expectations of marriage have parallels

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in some other South Asian transnational marriages, in this article I have argued that the processes that lead to these outcomes are distinct for the Ahmadis, reflecting aspects of social class and education linked with Ahmadi religious identity and organization. Finally, in this preliminary exploration of Ahmadiyya marriage trends, I also suggest that there may be as much analytical value in paying attention to marriage proposals that have been rejected as in ones that result in actual marriages, for the insights they can offer into current expectations of and motivations for marriage.

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Notes
1. According to Ahmadi figures there are now over 10,000 Ahmadi mosques and 200 million members of the faith in Europe, North America, Asia, Africa and Australia. The best available non-Ahmadi estimates for the number of Ahmadis in the UK range from 10,000 to 15,000. The Ahmadis’ own website can be accessed from http://www.alislam.org/.
2. The title of a book written by the son of the founder and second Khalifah, Mahmud Ahmad.
3. Cf. Ballard (2004: 8): ‘the fact that 16.1% of those who identified themselves as being of mixed White and Asian ancestry [in the 2001 census] also identified themselves as Muslim may indicate that a higher proportion of Muslim immigrants have had children with White partners than is or was the case amongst Hindus or Sikhs.’
4. MTA was set up in 1992 on Sky. It broadcasts 24 hours a day in eight languages. The Ahmadis also have their own websites. Embracing the latest technology continues the mass printing programmes that were a part of Ahmadi practice from the start.

References

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