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**Mirrored boundaries: how ongoing homeland-hostland contexts shape Bangladeshi immigrant collective identity formation**

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**Abstract**

Largely overlooked in the international migration literature, migration from the Muslim world can reveal how the combination of globalization and ongoing homeland tensions shape immigrants' collective identity formation in the hostland. Using the case of Bangladeshi Muslims in Los Angeles, this article ethnographically traces how ongoing and historic homeland, hostland, and global political-religious contexts shape immigrants' everyday struggles over identity categories through two distinct but overlapping processes: 1) the immigrants' exposure to a more expanded, diverse range of people in the hostland; 2) their import of homeland cleavages to the receiving society. It argues that through international migration, migrants both produce and experience globalization, consequently both reiterating and reconstructing their identity categories in the hostland. It also shows how the immigrants' cross-border ties to not only their homeland and hostland but also to nation-states *beyond* shape their identity-work, thus revealing conceptual ambiguities about transnationalism and diaspora.

**Key words**

Transnationalism, Globalization, International Migration, Immigrant Identity, Muslim American, Bangladeshi

## Introduction

The transnational perspective expanded the focus of immigration scholarship beyond the hostland, underscoring the persistence of immigrants' homeland ties. However, the foundational studies (Glick-Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton 1992, 1995; Portes, Guarino, and Landolt 1999; Levitt 2001) focused on population movements in the Americas, which experience varying levels of political strife, but not intense ethno-religious violence. Consequently, while the literature correctly emphasizes the widespread, ongoing nature of immigrants' homeland ties, it largely overlooks the contexts of emigration when ethno-religious conflicts at the point of origin leave the nature of the homeland fundamentally contested.

This gap is particularly consequential regarding migration from the Muslim world. These migrants stem from multiethnic and/or multi-religious countries where the relationship between ethnicity and/or religion on one hand, and the state on the other is the fulcrum of conflict. To what extent the state represents a single ethnic/religious group or the diverse population within its boundaries informs deep, ongoing cleavages even as migrants settle throughout the developed world. Moreover, immigration often exposes Muslims to a diverse, frequently global, Muslim population, thus engendering a further tension between Muslims' local ethnic/national identities and their membership to an abstract but global panethnic Islamic community, the *Ummah*. Largely overlooked in the international migration literature, migration from the Muslim world can reveal how globalization and ongoing homeland tensions simultaneously shape immigrant identity in the hostland.

I address these gaps by using the case of Bangladeshi Muslims in the United States to ethnographically trace how ongoing as well as historic homeland, hostland, and global contexts shape immigrants' everyday struggles over recognition as members of an identity category. Although not entirely representative of the extremely heterogeneous Muslim migrant experience, this population is well-suited to this study's intellectual objective because Bangladesh is predominantly (but not exclusively) Muslim, and religion historically underlies the intense political tensions ongoing both *between* members of the religious majority and minority as well as *within* the religious majority.

The case of Bangladeshi Muslims tells the story of how two distinct but overlapping processes interact in shaping immigrant identity categories. First, it shows how immigrants in the hostland, through international migration, both produce and experience the effects of globalization. Immigrants bring with them the cultural beliefs, practices, and values of the homeland to the receiving society where they encounter both native and non-native groups from diverse ethnic backgrounds. As this wide range of individuals mesh with each other within the host society, they produce contact and interaction between various cultures and societies. This would have been impossible had immigrants remained in their respective countries of origin. Consequently, national identities that had been previously latent among the hostland's native-born population when the migrants lived in foreign lands get triggered, producing nativist reactions against the newcomers from abroad. Thus, it is *after* international migration and *in* the hostland that immigrants experience the interconnectedness of diverse societies from across the globe. Through these encounters, immigrants also apprehend the similarities and differences *between* and *within* categories of people. Simultaneously, both the immigrants and natives attribute meanings to these differences and similarities, doing so in ways influenced by the ongoing hostland socio-political environment. While some dimensions of their identity categories are made salient through these interactions, others lose relevance. Still other dimensions get reconstructed as immigrants, responding to their post-migration experiences, reevaluate their location not only within their newly adopted country but also according to their expanded worldview.

As will be shown, the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants' membership in Islam gains salience in the multi-religious US society and is given politically charged meanings post-9/11. Encounters

with native host populations highlight differences between ‘Muslim’ and ‘non-Muslim’ identity categories that activate other forms of identities. It is also after migration to the multiethnic United States that Bangladeshi Muslims actually encounter and interact with the *Ummah*. The infusion of multiethnic co-religionists allows contact between Muslims of diverse national backgrounds, which would have been impossible in the largely ethnically homogenous Bangladeshi society. These interactions lead the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants to realize that their religious practices have been infused with local cultural elements. Furthermore, interactions with co-religionists from different countries reflect gaping inequalities within the Muslim world at the global level. A key finding of this study is that, according to Bangladeshis, there is a hierarchy of Muslim groups with Arab Muslims at the top and Bangladeshi Muslims towards the bottom. Despite subscribing to the same religion, immigrants thus do not always view each other as having equal levels of religious authority or understanding based on national background. Thus, it is after international migration that these immigrants also become ‘nationals’ as they realize their location as an ethnic/national Muslim group according to their new globalized worldview. As will be discussed, this finding has implications pertaining to the concept of diaspora.

Second, the Bangladeshi Muslim case shows how immigrants bring with them to the hostland their deeply embedded ethno-religious conflicts, inherited from colonial regimes in the homeland. As such, there can also be cleavages *within the same national* immigrant group based on religious-political divisions imported from the homeland. The historical and ongoing conflicts ingrained in Bangladeshi society and national consciousness prevail among the immigrants even as they settle in the hostland. Bangladeshi Muslims’ homeland-oriented social divisions, networks, and loyalties do not disappear once they enter the host country. Instead, telecommunication technologies reinforce the homeland divisions by relaying and diffusing information of ongoing homeland conflicts. The immigrants use this flow of information as raw materials to replenish dialogue with each other, and reiterate the boundaries within the community. Thus, the collective identity struggles of the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant community *mirror* the religious-political divisions ongoing in the homeland. However, although the salience of these homeland divisions does not diminish in the immigrants’ identity-making processes, the meanings attributed to them are reconstructed as immigrants reevaluate their collective position in light of their exposure to diverse populations and identity categories in the hostland.

Through these inter-related processes, the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants maintain sometimes competing (but not mutually exclusive) identity categories—Bangladeshi, Bangali, Muslim, and Bangladeshi Muslim—using language, space, symbols, organizations, and individual interactions on an everyday basis. These identity categories are given meaning in relation to the socio-political dynamics of both the homeland and hostland. To better understand the specificity of these identity categories, a brief overview of the historic and ongoing religious-political tensions underlying Bangladeshi society and national consciousness is as follows.

### **Historical overview of ongoing religious-political homeland tensions**

Religion is a defining factor in Bangladeshi national identity, politics, social life, and everyday moral order (Devine and White 2013; Siddiqi 2006). Divisions along religious-political lines run deep in Bangladeshi national consciousness. The identities of Bangali and Bangladeshi, Muslim and Bangladeshi Muslim are extremely contentious, as they speak to which political party one belongs to—Awami League (AL) or Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)/Jamaat-i-Islam—and the corresponding identity of Secularist or Muslim. The identities of ‘Bangali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ are layered with meanings that reflect internal divisions. In the Bangladeshi public consciousness, ‘Bangali’ suggests support for AL and ideals of secular nationalism based on a common Bangla language and culture that is negatively associated with the neighboring nation-state, India. Relationally, ‘Bangladeshi’ implies support for BNP/Jamaat and a Bangali *Muslim* identity, which is

negatively associated with *Rajakars* or Pakistani sympathizers. These identity categories, in turn, signify whether one is a 'true Bangladeshi' or a 'traitor'.

The foundation of the religion- and politics-laden identity categories in Bangladeshi society today arguably go back to British colonial policies in the Indian sub-continent. During their colonization of India for two centuries, British administrators categorized their subjects based on *religious* affiliation, differing from pre-colonial classifications (Uddin 2006). They viewed Muslims and Hindus as 'two separate communities with distinct political interests' and strategically developed different education, electorate, and civil service policies for each group (Uddin 2006, 48). As a consequence of Britain's Divide and Rule policies, religious difference between Hindus and Muslims gained political salience. Religion became a fundamental factor in constructing their nationalist ideas even as the entire subcontinent fought for independence from the British. Hindu-Muslim tensions rose, imploding in the 1947 Partition of Bengal along religious lines as carved by the withdrawing British forces. On one hand, India was predominantly Hindu. On the other, West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) comprised one Muslim state but were geographically separated being located on either side of India. The partition pitted these states against each other, instigating large-scale massacres and forced migrations of both Hindus and Muslims across the borders as Hindus fled from Pakistan to India, and Muslims from India to Pakistan. Memories of these atrocities fuelled by religion remain in Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi national consciousness to this day.

Despite common religious affiliation, however, East and West Pakistan considered themselves culturally, economically, politically, and ethnically different from one another. Culturally, East Pakistan aligned more with the neighboring India than with West Pakistan located over 2000 kilometers away. The balance of power between East and West Pakistan was in favor of the latter, leading East Pakistan to claim economic and political emancipation. War ensued where ironically West Pakistan justified the genocide of East Pakistanis on religious grounds as they claimed to save the country's Islamic ideals from the neighboring Indian/Hindu influence (Riaz 2010).

Greatly shaken by the use of religion as a tool for violence in both partitions, Bangladesh became independent in 1971 based on ideals of secularism, Bangali nationalism (nation-building based on the common use of Bangla language), socialism, and democracy. But only two decades since its independence, state politics transitioned from vehement exclusion of Islam from state affairs to embracing Islamist groups, such as Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh, as major power players in national politics (Ahmad 2008; Uddin 2006). This bipolar transition was possible because Islam is central to the overwhelming majority of the Bangladeshi population. Of the country's total population, almost 90 percent are Muslims while Hindus comprise around a dwindling 9 percent (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project 2012). Religion is embedded in public sentiment and is exploited by the two rival political parties—Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

AL claims to be a secular political party, advancing Bangali nationalism, which emphasizes unity of all Bangalis, Muslims *and* Hindus. AL spearheaded the independence movement and stepped into power after the war, banning Islamic parties from entering state politics. However, BNP took power after the AL Prime Minister was assassinated. BNP withdrew the ban on religion in government and replaced Bangali nationalism with *Bangladeshi* nationalism, i.e. a Bangali *Muslim* national identity that separated Bangladesh from India or the 'other' Hindu Bangalis in Indian Bengal.

Eventually, Islam became the state religion and Jamaat partnered with BNP became the ruling coalition in 2001. Jamaat seeks to advance revivalist Islam through the establishment of an Islamic state with the Shariah as state law. Many of its leaders were Pakistani allies in the independence war. Advancing Islamic solidarity with other Muslim states, *including Pakistan*, Jamaat's image is largely that of a '*Rajakar*' or traitor. Supporters of Jamaat as well as its historical ally BNP

are branded as *Rajakars*. On the other hand, supporters of AL are associated with a Bangali identity, which, for many, renders them too close to India for comfort. Although India was Bangladesh's ally against Pakistan in 1971, the religious divide between Hindu India and Muslim Bangladesh, and the contested India-Bangladesh border created hostility towards India in Bangladeshi public consciousness. AL supporters and/or those identifying as Bangali are often suspected to be India sympathizers.

In 2008, AL took back power and began the 1971 war tribunals. In 2012, a number of key Jamaat leaders were sentenced to death and/or imprisonment for their activities against Bangladeshis and freedom fighters during the war. These sentences sparked controversy in the Bangladeshi public, both in defense of the country's Muslim leaders (Jamaat) and in support of the sentences or harsher punishments. Exploited by AL, BNP, and Jamaat, religious and national divides have amplified. Strikes, violent public conflicts, and killings led by student political leaders done in the name of religion became regular occurrences. Those in defense of Islam are publicly branded as *Rajakars* while those in support of secularism are branded as atheists.

### **Methodology**

I conducted participant observation (including semi-structured, conversational interviews at fieldsites) for nine months during 2012-2013 (with several follow-ups) in Los Angeles, which hosts a Bangladeshi enclave and one of the largest Bangladeshi immigrant populations in the United States. I accessed the community using a Bangladeshi restaurant/grocery-store inside the enclave and a biweekly Bangla language school located in another part of Los Angeles. This enabled me to locate Bangladeshis living throughout Los Angeles. As a young Bangladeshi woman proficient in Bangla, I had an insider's access to their community and family lives.

On weekends, men from the enclave gathered at the restaurant to share conversations over food, some staying long after they had eaten to catch the news from the store's television. I visited here twice a week as a customer, usually sitting at the back where I had a complete floor-view. I observed everyone's interactions, sometimes participating in ongoing conversations. The storeowner usually introduced me to the customers as a doctoral student. This status cast me in a favorable light, paving the way for conversations about family, career-choices, and education. A couple of the men introduced me to their wives who saw me as a young girl away from family for pursuing higher education, and invited me to their homes.

At the Bangla school I volunteered as a language teacher, a position that allowed me to become familiar to the families and interact with them during class and community-lunches. Eventually, in addition to my regular field-visits, I branched out to other locations and gatherings through people I met during fieldwork. I was invited to people's homes for private dinners and community get-togethers, organizational events, cultural festivals, as well as casual hang-outs at restaurants, museums, shopping-malls, and farmers-markets. I analyze my findings below.

### **Immigrants producing and experiencing globalization**

Globalization refers to the interconnectedness of various societies from across the globe through large-scale population and informational flows leading to a more integrated world (Scholte 2005). Through international migration, immigrants create contact between diverse societies, identity categories, cultures, social beliefs and practices in the hostland. Immigrants are categorized into identity labels in the hostland regardless of their own narratives based on ongoing socio-political contexts. Through these interactions immigrants also experience the effects of globalization as they begin to see themselves and their multiple identities differently—they reevaluate their collective position not only within their adopted country, but also in the more expansive and interconnected society than before migration. The immigrants in this new context either establish new identity categories or give new meanings to pre-existing categories for themselves.

In focusing on the contrast between natives and foreigners, immigrants become aware of the differences *between* identity categories as they become exposed to the new hostland social and religious environment, particularly the views and expectations of the majority group. Immigrants from the Muslim world arriving in a non-Muslim (predominantly Christian) country like the US discover what it means to be a member of both a foreign nationality *and* a minority religion. For example, upon arrival, Bangladeshi Muslims are exposed to an Islamophobic narrative that conflates extremists and moderates within one ‘Muslim’ identity category viewing them all as national security threats and holding all Muslims accountable for the violent actions of a select few in both domestic and foreign conflicts (Maira 2009; Cainkar 2009). For instance, during an informal Bangladeshi gathering the week after the Boston Marathon bombings, guests exchanged news of how their Bangladeshi friends and family in Boston were doing. One of the families had a female friend in Boston who wears a *hijab*. She was shoved from behind in the streets and was called derogatory names for being Muslim. ‘But, it was nothing much—she didn’t get injured,’ we were told. Such encounters with the native population inform Bangladeshi immigrants of their ‘Other-ness’ in the host society. More specifically, they become conscious of a politically charged ‘Muslim’ identity category imposed on them by the natives, an awareness that had not occurred in their homeland where they were the religious majority.

Thus, the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants interpret various encounters with the native host population in relation to the overarching post-9/11 socio-political environment and homeland-oriented identities. Based on these interpretations the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants attach racially/ethnically and religiously charged meanings to their *national* identity category. These immigrants position themselves and their homeland-oriented organizations in response to Islamophobic hostland encounters. For example, RELIEF is a charity organization run by middle-class Bangladeshi professionals that funds development projects in Bangladeshi rural areas. The organization rigorously screens potential projects to first and foremost ensure they have ‘absolutely no connection’ to any religious cause. This organization emphasizes secularism not because they view religion as a divisive line back in Bangladesh, but because the United States identifies the Bangladeshi immigrant community as Muslim. Where the money goes and how it will be spent, thus, depend on the identity category imposed on the immigrant group by the host state in relation to its socio-political context. At an invitation-only charity dinner, the board members gave a presentation on the organization’s history and objectives. The first point the board members talked about is that ‘we Bangladeshis’ have to remember that this is a ‘post 9/11 world and that *we are Muslims*’ and that Bangladesh is an Islamic country. The board members explained that they have to be extremely careful about where their money goes because they are under surveillance as Muslims. Bangladesh, in fact, had been one of the twenty-six Muslim-majority sending countries in the US government’s ‘special registration’ program for ensuring national security after 9/11. The Bangladeshi immigrant organization’s transnational secular identity is a reaction to Islamophobic encounters in post 9/11 America.

Thus, the Bangladeshis undergo an experience of foreignness common to most immigrants—albeit in this case, a double foreignness compounded by nationality and religion that highlights the differences *between* identity categories. However, as populations of myriad ethnic and national origins in the Muslim world all converge in the United States, hostland encounters also highlight differences *within* identity categories, which, in the Bangladeshi Muslim case made them aware of the differences separating them from other Muslim nationals. These differences between groups within the Muslim identity category are interpreted in ways that reflect the inequalities and historic tensions that percolate among countries at the global level. Due to exposure to multiethnic coreligionists in the hostland these differences become salient in the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants’ globalized worldview.

Generally, Bangladesh is a country largely invisible in the American imaginary. In research, Bangladeshis are usually lumped together as South Asians and Muslims, overlooking the internal group dynamics. Paradoxically, however, simultaneous to Bangladeshis' obscurity as an immigrant group, their homeland Bangladesh is infamous for its floods, poverty, and political instability. Thus when Bangladesh does come up in the American media and discussions, it is almost always because of its natural calamities, poverty, and political corruption (Kibria 2011).<sup>1</sup> In stark contrast to Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia is one of the wealthiest countries in the world as well as a key player in global politics. Most importantly to Muslims, Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and the Prophet, and hosts the *Ka'aba*, the place most sacred to Muslims worldwide. Saudi Arabia is generally perceived to be the custodians of Islam as exemplified by its regulating the national quota on who gets to perform pilgrimage or *Hajj* each year.

I found that although Bangladeshi generally implies Muslim, the category of *Bangladeshi* Muslim implies having less religious knowledge and authority than Muslims from Saudi Arabia. Through international migration, this global imbalance of power within the Muslim world trickles down, gains salience, and shapes how Muslim immigrants from different nationalities view each other as they physically interact within a multiethnic hostland, such as the United States. Throughout my fieldwork, interactions with Bangladeshi Muslims revealed this underlying sense of national hierarchy within the 'Muslim' category wherein the Bangladeshis placed Arab Muslims at a higher rank. For example, I had asked Nazma, a woman actively involved in the Bangladeshi community for almost three decades why most Bangladeshis tend to celebrate Islamic occasions mostly amongst themselves. She replied, 'Because they [Bangladeshi men] can't boss around in the Muslim community! There are Muslims from *Arab* countries—*really learned Muslims*. Who among them would listen to a Bangladeshi *Bhai*?' In this context, *Bhai*, meaning brother in Bangla, carries belittling connotations. Although Nazma's spontaneous response may appear to be flippant, it in fact reveals a gaping divide among Muslim nations at the global level. I analyze this internal dynamics based on an underlying hierarchy in depth in the following ethnographic observation:

I was waiting for my order at the Bangladeshi restaurant when a family of seven entered. The family looked religious. The father had a long beard and wore clothes traditional for Muslim men. The mother wore a *burkha*. Even though the restaurant was almost empty and had several booths unoccupied, the mother went all the way to the end of the store and sat at the last booth with her back to the entrance, completely hidden from view. The three sons and two daughters sat with her. The father sat on the next booth all by himself. Although there was plenty of room for people to sit in his booth, one of the sons borrowed an extra chair from another table to join the mother. The older daughter sat with her, facing the back wall, and the youngest daughter sat at the corner with only her head showing. Both daughters wore *burkha*. The three sons were wearing the same kind of clothes as the father who had an air of authority—he was clearly the head of the family. He placed orders for the whole family and had to pass by me several times to get napkins and ketchup. I noticed he never looked at me directly. When he did look at me to exchange pleasantries, he looked at my right arm.

I had to go check on my food and by the time I came back, I saw that the father was having a lively conversation in English with a young man who was having lunch by himself on the other side of the restaurant. I understood from their conversation that the young man was from Saudi Arabia. He spoke with a heavy accent. He has been in the America for four months and attends a university in California. After complimenting the young man's English, the father told him that his oldest son is now a *Quran Hafiz* (one who has memorized the Quran). He then turned towards his son telling him to go sit next to the young man. "He is from Medina! Allah has truly graced us," said the father in Bangla to his son. The son did as he was told. I inferred from their excited expression that this encounter was indeed viewed as a treat. The father told the young Arab to ask his son to recite his favorite verses from the



Quran. The Arab asked the boy to recite anything. The boy started to recite the Quranic verses loudly. Everyone in the restaurant stopped talking and turned to listen. They were all smiling. After the boy was done, the Arab turned to look at the father and said ‘*MashaAllah*’. One of the customers in the restaurant exclaimed ‘Thank you!’ The Bangladeshi boy smiled widely and even wider when the young Arab man told him that he could go to a famous Medina school for higher Islamic studies. The boy had heard about this school and wants to go there to study.

Here, the Bangladeshi Muslims not only interacted with a foreign *national* but with one who is also a foreign *co-religionist*. The Bangladeshi and Arab immigrants in this instance actualized the abstract notion of the *Ummah* by physically connecting multiethnic Muslims and their societies with each other. The father could very likely not have met an Arab Muslim man from Medina had he remained in Bangladesh. It is after migrating to the receiving country that immigrants such as the father are exposed to an expansive and diverse range of encounters with people and societies from across the globe.

By exposing Bangladeshis to coreligionists of foreign nationalities not present within their homeland boundaries, globalization via migration forces them to confront their status within the hierarchy of Muslim-origin peoples. The father did not ask, for example, whether the young man was religious, but instead upon hearing that the young man was from Medina the father assumed the man was an Arab *Muslim* whom he and his family were ‘graced’ by Allah to have met. Again, despite the Eid dates in Bangladesh and America being different from Saudi Arab, many of the Bangladeshi immigrants celebrated Eid on the day the Saudis observed it. Eid is the main religious festival for Muslims scheduled based on new moon sightings supervised by religious authorities in each country. However, these Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants viewed the Saudi lunar calendar to be the most ‘authentic’.

The immigrants’ encounters across Muslim cultures reinforce the sense of hierarchy as immigrants question the correctness of their own religious practices. For example, Tipu, a young man I met at a social event, has learnt after encountering Arab Muslims in America that some of the religious festivals that Bangladeshis observe do not have roots in Islamic scriptures and are not observed elsewhere. ‘Islam’ he said, ‘is more like a culture than religion’ in Bangladesh where religious leaders are politically motivated and little educated. Indeed, for many Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants Bangladesh is not only a poor developing country but also one that is geographically and culturally proximate to the largely *Hindu* India, as a consequence of which Islam in Bangladesh includes local elements that are not part of ‘real Islam’. The view that Hindu culture is the antipode of Islamic beliefs, so much so that any cultural diffusion between the two because of proximity adulterates Islam, is rooted in historic national-religious conflicts still ongoing in Bangladesh, as overviewed towards the beginning of this article.

Religion indeed remains a potent source of cleavage within the Bangladeshi national category as Hindus and Muslims tend to organize separately from each other even in the hostland. Even within the ‘Muslim’ identity category where all members mainly adhere to Islam or within the ‘Bangladeshi Muslim’ identity category in which the members ascribe to both the same religion and nationality, historic and ongoing homeland political dynamics play a persisting role. The next section shows how, through encounters in the hostland that highlight the differences between and within religious/national categories, the cleavages dividing the immigrant community mirror those ongoing in the homeland.

### **Homeland-oriented cleavages within the national group**

While immigrants are foreigners in the hostland, they also encounter co-nationals from different segments of the homeland society as they engage in different ethnic organizations and build ethnic communities. The co-national immigrants find common reference-points based on

national history, language, culture, and ethnicity amongst each other. For example, the historical and political divides between Pakistan and Bangladesh are still salient in the collective national memories of the Bangladeshi immigrants observed in this study. Despite sharing Islam as a common religion with Pakistan, association with Pakistanis is still stigmatizing within the Bangladeshi community as exemplified in the following conversation I had with a group of woman I met in the Bangladeshi enclave.

One of the women brought up the recent wedding of the daughter of another woman present in our group. I learnt that the daughter married a Pakistani man. The mother immediately corrected the other woman by saying that the groom's *parents* are from Pakistan'. 'You mean Pakistani?' I asked. She immediately responded, 'his parents *happen* to be from Pakistan—not him. He was raised in America'. Another woman in the group commented that she had gone to another wedding where the groom was also from Pakistan. The mother, I observed, was uncomfortable during the conversation as she fidgeted with her fingers and was eager to change the topic.

That a wedding between a Bangladeshi and Pakistani is a topic of gossip in the Bangladeshi community as well as the mother's reluctance and discomfort in her daughter marrying someone with Pakistani heritage suggest that association with Pakistanis is not considered a norm among the Bangladeshi immigrants. This reflects an existing cleavage between Bangladesh and Pakistan in the Bangladeshi immigrants' collective consciousness produced from their common history of national struggle.

Conversely, interactions with co-nationals in the hostland can reveal the differences *within* the national group as individuals have opposing viewpoints and interpretations of Bangladesh's history and ongoing political events. Despite identifying within a 'Bangladeshi' *national* identity category, many immigrants in this study also subscribed to other homeland-oriented identities, such as 'Bangali' based on political allegiances informed by Bangladesh's turbulent history of state-formation and subsequent ongoing political-religious tensions. These homeland conflicts are embedded in the immigrants. As such, they struggle to create boundaries within the same national group based on ongoing political tensions entrenched in Bangladesh's history, society, and national consciousness overtime that immigrants import to the US.

The salience of religion as a dividing line within the Bangladeshi immigrant community separating Muslims and Hindus exemplifies this point. There is little Hindu presence in the Bangladeshi immigrant community even in cultural events open to *all* Bangladeshis. In the language school, only two of the fourteen attending families were Hindu. Nazma explained why the Bangladeshi community in Los Angeles is largely Muslim: 'Religion is definitely a dividing line in the community. No one likes to admit it and no one does it with intention. It just happens.' She said that Hindu Bangladeshis do not 'mix' with Muslim Bangladeshis after arriving in America. 'They mix more with Hindu Bangalis from Kolkata [a city in India with a large Bangali speaking population along the western borders of Bangladesh]'. Nazma further said that the 'Hindu culture' in the *Bangali* community resonates more with Hindu Bangladeshis than the culture in the *Bangladeshi* community, which is 'unintentionally Muslim' making Hindu Bangladeshis feel 'left out'. Bangladeshi Muslims used to attend Bangali events in other organizations run by Bangalis from Kolkata. However, these events usually opened with Hindu rituals (such as *puja*, coconut breaking). 'So Muslim Bangalis don't go there because it's not them,' Nazma said. Similarly, even though Eid parties to celebrate the Islamic festival in the Bangali community are open to all Bangalis, Hindu Bangalis do not attend.

Although situated in the Bangladeshi enclave, the restaurant fieldsite structurally catered to Muslim Bangladeshis. Thus, the store has a big sign on the wall saying "Halal Meat" in English, with a smaller sign in Bangla informing that the store takes orders for meat shares for Eid celebrations. The customers and staff are co-ethnics—Bangladeshi Muslim. Usually women who come in for grocery shopping or dining with their families wear a *hijab*, a *burkha*, or a shawl covering their hair,

indicating their Islamic belief. I only once saw a Hindu couple – identifiable as Hindu from the vermilion on the wife's hair – enter the store. The couple did not dine, but left after purchasing their groceries. By contrast, it was easy to tell when customers in the dining area were Muslim (as in most cases) because of the frequent references to Islam in their conversations with one another. For example, customers and the storeowner usually exchanged *salaam* upon entering the store. Even casual day-to-day interactions had Islamic connotations. For example, when the storeowner asked his helper to carry a hot tray to the kitchen he jokingly said, 'If you are a true Muslim, you have no fear! You will not burn!' implying that Allah will protect him.

Whereas Nazma's comment, above, attributes the distance between Bangladeshi Muslims and Hindu immigrants to cultural differences, consideration of ongoing homeland contexts points to deeper roots. A religious minority, the Hindu presence in Bangladesh is a source of intense political tensions because Islamic fundamentalist groups want to eliminate them from the country despite the fact that they are Bangladeshi citizens. In fact, Bangladesh has been named an 'egregious violator' of human rights because of violent outbreaks against Hindu citizens, and illegal confiscation of their property (Hindu American Foundation 2012).

Whether and how to include Hindu presence in immigrant community spaces is a conscious decision in Bangladeshi cultural organizations. For example, in the case of the language school, which is comprised of mostly Bangladeshi Muslim families, members stressed that it was a place for 'not necessarily Bangladeshis, but Bangalis. Anyone who wants to learn the Bangla language is welcome here. It was a meeting place for the *Bangali* community.' When I asked some of the parents who attended American graduate schools if they had other Bangladeshis in their departments, I was told that although they did not know other 'Bangladeshis', they knew some 'Bangalis'. 'Which is what matters,' Nazma, who attends the school, quickly added. She said, 'We are all Bangalis. We have the same culture, same language. We Bangalis are all one.'

Nazma is an influential person both in the school and in the larger Bangladeshi immigrant community. She tries to create spaces to unite *Bangalis* through participation in South Asian organizations, arranging events that are deliberately inclusive of both Muslim and Hindu cultures. One way she institutionally enforces a secular Bangali identity is through use of language in community events under her supervision. For example, the events at the language school always began with both Islamic and Hindu greetings ('*Salaam* and *Nomoshkar*') or the secular Bangla word for welcome ('*Shagotom*'). Despite the low turn out of Bangladeshi Hindus and Kolkata Bangalis, this deliberate use of language within the school symbolically includes all Bangalis, regardless of religion and nationality. In order to create a Bangali community, any symbol that may show bias towards a particular religion (for example, Islam over Hinduism) is consciously omitted.

Despite these attempts, the immigrants *from* Bangladesh are nonetheless divided by a religious line between Bangalis (Hindu) and Bangladeshis (Muslims). In some contexts (as described above), this division translates into different communities with people organizing and participating separately based on their homeland political dispositions and whether they emphasize their national identities as 'Bangladeshis', linguistic identities as 'Bangalis' or their religious identities as 'Muslims' in the hostland. In some other contexts, these communities overlap within a common space. For example, Jamila has a son whom she brings to the 'Bangali community' in the language school for Bangla lessons and also to be around other 'Bangladeshi children'. When I asked her why she used the term *Bangladeshi* instead *Bangali*, she said, 'Of course we mix with Bangalis as well. We [Bangalis] have the same language but there is also the religion thing. From Bangladeshis, my son can get the Muslim aspect of the Bangladeshi culture as well.' Some of the other mothers I spoke with reflected similar motivations as Jamila's.

While Nazma and others like her want the language school to be a secular Bangali space, there are others who want the school to be more conducive to Islamic norms. This tension became

explicit during a conversation among the mothers who were mostly in charge of the language school. A mother of two daughters, Rahima is well known in the community. She wants the school to be gender-segregated. She and her eldest daughter wear a *hijab*. In keeping with a conservative interpretation of Islamic rules, Rahima does not want her two daughters attending the school to come in front of men outside the family. If the school does not enforce these Islamic traditions, Rahima would not want her daughters attending the school. Rahima's example of wanting to create a *Muslim* environment shows that the language school, despite explicitly promoting a secular identity, is a contested space where actors do boundary-work based on religious and national lines rooted in Bangladesh.

The Bangladeshi immigrants also imported explicitly *political* divisions and the identity categories produced from them, which characterize the ongoing socio-political landscape in Bangladesh. The salience of these imported political identities is visible in the collective boundary-work within the Bangladeshi immigrant community. For example, every year, the Bangladesh Day Parade takes place in the LA Bangladeshi enclave for all Bangladeshis to commemorate Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan. The LA Bangladeshi organizations pay the city to block the streets for the parade to march through the neighborhood. At one such parade, people were wearing traditional clothes in red and green—the colors of the Bangladesh flag. Bangladeshi patriotic songs were blaring from the front of the parade. As participants carried organizational banners, tiny Bangladeshi flags, and even a few American flags, the whole neighborhood became transformed into a space for celebrating Bangladeshi-ness. I was surprised, however, that women from a Muslim organization wearing *hijabs* and *burkhas* comprised the largest group in the parade. Also, although I saw a banner for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), I did not see one for Awami League (AL), or a Bangladeshi Hindu organization. I realized that this parade was comprised of and catered to only Bangladeshi Muslims. An elderly woman in a sari watching the parade from the sidewalk who was apparently well known in the community told me that she used to live in this neighborhood for many years before moving. I asked her about her thoughts on the parade. She replied that it is usually three times bigger. As Jamaat was believed to have funded the parade, many people and organizations (especially those who are against Jamaat and/or support AL) did not participate, expecting it to become political in light of the contentious 1971 war tribunals ongoing in Bangladesh that year. The woman also informed me that there was a rumor of another, BNP march later that day protesting AL supporters' boycott of the parade. My conversation with the woman was interrupted then as a young man broke from the parade shouting, 'Are we *Rajakars*? We are all Bangladeshis. We are here *as Bangladeshis*. Why would they not come?!' I later heard from two participants that a fight had broken out in the festival following the parade. A singer who flew in from Bangladesh played 'secular' songs, which in the political context of that time meant he was spreading not just anti-Jamaat or anti-BNP propaganda, but anti-Islamic ones. His songs triggered outrage in some people from the audience, instigating the fight.

These observations suggest that some imported identity categories are reproduced in the hostland. The salience of these homeland-oriented identity categories does not diminish and remain unaltered in their meanings because Bangladeshis continue to encounter and interact with co-nationals in Los Angeles. Furthermore, the Bangladeshi immigrants' homeland connections bolstered by technological advancements provide ways to cultivate these Bangladesh-oriented identities. Social media, blogs, phone calls, Bangladeshi news channels, and regular visits back home provide information of the ongoing day-to-day political scenario in Bangladesh as well as provide channels to engage in homeland politics. Bangladeshi bloggers and Facebook users living abroad were a key force in shaping the ongoing movement to prosecute conspirators of Bangladesh's liberation war. Although immigrants are not directly affected by Bangladeshi politics because of being physically outside of the home state's reach, their loved ones left behind are. This emotional

attachment serves as a motivation for immigrants to closely follow the political situation back home. Whenever there is an instance of increased violence, they call their families to make sure that they are safe. The immigrants' interest and knowledge of ongoing developments in homeland politics are reflected in the group conversations in social gatherings where Bangladeshi politics is the main topic of discussion and heated debates. The television in the Bangladeshi restaurant usually plays Bangladeshi news channels for the customers. Many families with school-going children also visit Bangladesh at least once every two to three years. Some immigrants involved in Bangladeshi development organizations also go to Bangladesh to oversee sponsored projects. When they come back, they have insider updates for others in the immigrant community. Telecommunication advancements, thus, not only reinforce homeland identities but also enlarge the diffusion of homeland conflicts to the diaspora. Such flows of information from the homeland to the hostland serve as raw materials to replenish discussions and debates among immigrants within the same national group. These interactions conversely also reinforce the imported homeland political identity categories within the immigrant community.

### **Conclusion**

This article shows how homeland political-religious tensions spill over and combine with existing hostland and global contexts to shape immigrants' collective identity categories on the ground. In their struggle to reconcile imported homeland cleavages with an expanded, post-migration worldview, immigrants reevaluate, reiterate, and/or reconstruct previously taken for granted meanings attached to their identities.

Overall, the article reflects a contrast between political transnationalism of migrations within the Americas and those from elsewhere in the developing world where multiethnic/multi-religious states have risen from colonialist empires. In the former, reflecting the stability of territorial boundaries, political transnationalism has been often aimed towards regime change, as among Cubans (Eckstein 2009), or has sought to attain extra-territorial participation in homeland democratic political processes (Smith and Bakker 2008; Smith 2003). In the latter, the political transnationalism of immigrants from developing countries elsewhere (particularly from the Muslim world, such as Bangladesh), long-distance, cross-border loyalties reflect the instability of the nation itself that is still under construction along the cleavages left by colonialist regimes. As shown, these past and ongoing homeland contexts shape immigrant identity-work in relation to hostland dynamics as the globalization of diverse populations via immigration reveals contrasts and similarities both between and within categories of people.

Furthermore, this article raises questions regarding the adequacy of transnationalism and, by extension, diaspora as concepts for analyzing the phenomena to which they refer. The concept of transnationalism refers to the social connections between homeland and hostland (Waldinger 2015) or 'the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and country of settlement' (Glick-Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton 1992, 1). However, the case of Bangladeshi Muslims highlights another form of cross-border tie, one that extends across not only the borders of receiving and sending states, but, as in the case of the *Ummah*, across numerous different states, nations, and ethnicities. The Bangladeshi immigrants' connections to Saudi Arabia, generally considered as the heartland of the Muslim world by believers, shaped their identity formation in addition to those with Bangladesh and the US. This shows that nation-states *other* than the immigrants' homeland and hostland, such as those important to their religious identity, can also shape their identity formation processes. As Levitt (2007) has noted, scholars of transnationalism need to adopt a globally interconnected lens for a more comprehensive understanding of the role of cross-border ties on immigrants. In focusing on the case of Bangladeshi Muslims, this article has sought to implement just such an understanding, and thereby extend the existing homeland-hostland framework.

In terms of diaspora, which studies migrants' connections between an imagined or real ethno-national center or 'referent origin' and multiple receiving states (Dufoix 2008), this article makes the theoretical point that a diaspora group can have *multiple* centers—both ethno-national *as well as religious* that simultaneously shape collective identity formation. Members of an immigrant group can subscribe to multiple identity categories, each of which is associated with a referent origin. For example, the center for the 'Bangladeshi' diaspora is Bangladesh, whereas, for the 'Muslim' diaspora it is arguably Saudi Arabia. However, Bangladeshi Muslims identify differently with *both* these diasporic groups—based on national origin with the former, and religion with the latter. As shown, their ties to both the ethno-national and religious centers shape their collective identity-work in the hostland. In order to move this research agenda forward, international migration researchers should explore how immigrants connect to multiple diasporic centers based on a sense of groupness and consequently do identity-work in relation to ongoing political-religious dynamics in the homeland, hostland, *and elsewhere beyond*.

## Notes

1. Kibria (2011) analyzes Bangladesh's 'global national image' as an obscure developing country and how it affects its migrants in the world market economy. Although studying the same national group, this article, in contrast, theorizes how globalization via immigration, and homeland-hostland contexts shape internal identity-struggles within the 'Bangladeshi' and 'Muslim' categories.

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