THE PRACTICE OF HOMOGENEITY TO MULTICULTURALISM: SEOUL CENTRAL MOSQUE AS A POTENT SYMBOL OF ISLAM ASSIMILATION AND/OR ISLAMOPHOBIA IN SOUTH KOREA

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Abstract

Following the 9/11 attacks and the 2007 event where the Taliban abducted Korean citizens in Afghanistan, Islamophobic sentiments, such as unfavorable impressions and prejudices towards Islam and Muslims, have recently increased in South Korean society and affected the Muslim minority. This study seeks to enrich the knowledge of Islamic Studies and Korean Studies by providing a viewpoint rooted in realities faced by Korean Muslims and investigating how Koreans react to Islam and Islamophobia, analyzing written literature from the Korean perspective, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to determine whether the responses result from Islamophobia or Korean ethnocentrism. To limit the scope of the analysis, the researcher examines Seoul Central Mosque as a space and discourse for both the acceptance of and antagonism against Muslims among Koreans using social media to highlight the Koreans' general impression or image of the said Islamic institution. The paper concludes by arguing that there is anti-Islam sentiment in Korea toward the Seoul Central Mosque. This attitude is rooted in nationalism and Islamophobia due to the Taliban's abduction of Koreans in Afghanistan and the 9/11 attacks.

On the other hand, the Seoul Central Mosque may indicate that Koreans are slowly becoming more accepting of Islam. The Islamic institution serves as a welcoming urban area for intercultural communication between Koreans who are Muslims and those who are not. Nevertheless, Korea is more interested in Muslim business and economic activities in some cases due to its desire to access the global halal markets. Although it can be difficult for Korean Muslims to identify their position in society, they may be able to support broader global concerns by speaking Korean well and reducing cultural and sociological gaps and misconceptions between Muslims and the larger Korean population.

Keywords: Islam; Korea, Mosque; Islamophobia; Assimilation

Introduction

Before the arrival of Islam, the kingdom of Silla on the Korean peninsula and the Middle East had trade connections via the Maritime Silk Road. Following the advent of Islam, Muslim traders from all over the East, some of whom had settled there, for instance, in China, probably encountered Sillanean traders. Muslims also went to the Korean peninsula, where they found a wealth of natural resources, especially gold, and suitable living conditions (Yi, 1969). They developed Islamic heritage and culture. Muslims assimilated more during Chosun, although Islamic science and culture significantly influenced Korean civilization. The introduction of numerous Muslim Turks to Korea in the 20th century—immigrants and veterans of the Korean War—intensified the country's interactions with Islam (Lee,1997). Government support has increased the number of academic studies on Islam in Korea since the 9/11 event. As a result, many people have looked into Korean perceptions of Islam articulated in Orientalism or multiculturalism discourses. These works typically focus on Korean misconceptions of Arabs, Muslims, Middle Easterners, and Islam. These findings show that Koreans link religious fanaticism, harshness, and violence with Islam. Additionally, they view Muslims as misogynistic, war-torn, and primitive (Eum, 2017). These studies also emphasize that because of a lack of interest in and direct contact with Muslims and a disproportionate dependence on Western media, Korean ideas of Islam mirror the unfavorable characteristics of Western views. Jamass (2014) ascribed Koreans' misperceptions of Islam, in addition to the effect of Western media, to ethnonationalism, which promotes a homogenized "Koreanness" based on purportedly "pure" blood. Although the number of foreign Muslims in Korea has decreased from 150,000 to 100,000 since the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis in the late 1990s, and new immigration laws are making

it harder for foreign workers to enter the country, the Seoul Central Masjid continues to be a hub of activity (Kim, 2007).

The Seoul Central Masjid is the first mosque in Korea. The mosque's construction started in 1974 with assistance from donations from Islamic nations. Additionally, the Korean government gave 5,000 square meters of land. The mosque was inaugurated on May 21, 1976. Seven other mosques have been constructed across Korea since the opening of the Seoul Central Mosque (Baker, 2006). However, Seoul Central Mosque continues to be the only mosque in the Seoul Capital Area, and as such, it functions as the central gathering place for the city's Muslim population. Around the mosque, a bustling commercial district is mainly dedicated to preparing and selling Middle Eastern meals and other halal food (Kim, 2007). Meanwhile, several anti-Islamic protests by Christian groups took place at Seoul Central Mosque during the 2007 South Korean hostage crisis in Afghanistan, and the mosque received numerous bomb threats. As a result, a considerable increase in police sight was deemed crucial to prevent an incursion on worshipers or the edifice itself (Al Jazeera, 2007; Bae, 2007).

Materials and Methods

The study is based on qualitative research; hence the critical method used in data collection is the Korean image of the Seoul Central Mosque, the first Islamic institution in South Korea. This will tackle various issues like Islamophobia and assimilation by employing literary and comparative studies to assess how Korean interpretations of the Seoul Central Mosque are based on Assimilation and/or Islamophobia. Likewise, the researcher will use discourse analysis to dig into other aspects of Korean society's anti-Islam sentiment besides religion. To specify the objectives, (1) the researcher will analyze the social environment surrounding the Seoul Central Mosque; (2) discuss the Korean impressions, both Muslims and non-Muslims, of the Seoul Central Mosque and the Islam; and (3) apply Anderson's concept of Imagined Communities to Islam Assimilation and Islamophobia in South Korea's context of the Seoul Central Mosque. Most of the data analyzed come from the written literature about the Korean general discourse of the Seoul Central Mosque as space and discourse for both the acceptance and antagonism against Muslims.

Results and Discussions

Seoul Central Mosque and its Social Space

South Korea's Seoul Central Mosque, known as Islam Street, opened its doors in 1976. It is the sole mosque in the city and is situated on Usadan Street (Itaewon) in Hannam-dong of the Yongsan District. It offers lectures in Korean, Arabic, and English. Even while regular attendance has occasionally reached as high as 800 persons, Friday prayers typically draw between 400 and 500 worshipers in the afternoon (Song, 2007). Visitors are prohibited from smoking inside the mosque or wearing revealing clothing like sleeveless tops, short skirts, or shorts. Non-Muslims are welcome inside the mosque, but they should not disrupt anyone from praying by directing in front of people.

The Korean Muslim Federation (formerly known as the Korean Muslim Society) performed services in a temporary prayer hall in Seoul's downtown for about a decade before the mosque was built. At the time, it was estimated that less than 3,000 Muslims were residing in Korea (Lee, 2002). As a gesture of goodwill to potential Middle Eastern allies for the still-young Republic of Korea, President Park Chung-hee proposed the Korean Muslim Federation land to build a proper mosque. The administrations of Saudi Arabia and several other Middle Eastern countries responded by providing funds to aid in the mosque's construction. Most of the money was provided by Saudi Arabia. Seven other mosques were established across Korea after the inception of the Seoul Central Mosque. However, the only mosque in the Seoul Capital Area is Seoul Central Mosque, which makes it the operational center of the city's Muslim population. Around the mosque, a crowded commercial district has been mainly dedicated to preparing and selling Middle Eastern meals and other halal food (Kojima, 2006). The number of Muslims in Korea increased from less than three thousand to over fifteen thousand within a year of the opening of the Seoul Central Mosque. With the significant influx of foreign laborers from Muslim nations like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia in the 1990s, that number climbed rapidly to over 50,000 (Joung, 1991). The Korea Economic Institute estimates that 150,000 Muslims lived in Korea in 2021, including 45,000 Koreans and 105,000 foreigners.

Moreover, Muslim students are expected to grow as Seoul becomes a more sought-after study-abroad destination between 2019 and 2021. As a result, 20% more overseas students will be enrolled in degree programs between 2019 and 2021(Lee, 2012). The Korea Muslim Federation estimates that less than 200,000 Muslims live in South Korea, or 0.38 percent of the country's total population (KMF). Most of them are employees and students from nations like Turkey, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. One thousand and ten of them have obtained Korean citizenship—Korea's Muslims hail from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Malaysia. The number of Muslims from West Asia, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Libya, is significantly lower. A growing number of Muslim brides and grooms are also relocating to Korea, eventually forming Muslim families in the expanding multicultural cultures of Korea (Jeon, 2011).

However, despite increasing numbers, Muslims and Koslims are not well-received in Korean society. Muslim culture in Korea has minimal regard for them; public programs are lacking. In addition, Hwang notes that there appears to be a "social distance" between Korean society and Muslims, observing that it is either indifferent to or uninterested in them. Additionally, Muslims who want to maintain their way of life in Korea are not given enough consideration. For example, when a Muslim woman wears a headscarf or hijab, passersby in the streets inevitably stare at her rather pointedly (Jing, 2011). Seoul Central Mosque became the site of several anti-Islamic protests by Christian groups and the target of numerous bomb threats during the 2007 South Korean hostage crisis in Afghanistan, to the point where a substantial increase in police sight was deemed necessary to prevent an incursion on worshipers or else on the edifice itself.

In addition to providing Muslims in Korea with a place of worship, the Seoul Central Mosque was built to inform the general public about Islam and Islamic cultures. The Korea Muslim Federation office and a meeting room are located on the mosque's first floor. The women's musalla is on the third floor, while the men's musalla is on the second floor (prayer hall). Both worshipers and outsiders are welcome at the mosque (Lee, 2009). As the primary location of Islam in Korea, Seoul Central Masjid has served its purpose since its opening in May 1976 by directing Islamic missions and fostering cross-cultural interaction.

Korean Impressions, both Muslims and Non-Muslims, of the Seoul Central Mosque and the Islam

The Itaewon mosque is not only a place of worship for Muslims but also plays a vital role in fostering relationships between Koreans interested in Islam (Lee, 2012). One of the most well-known verses from the Quran is translated into Korean at the mosque's entryway. Once inside the mosque, one finds the original Arabic lettering on the side wall. This creative arrangement of displays demonstrates that Muslims are not attempting to create an exclusive community in Itaewon. Such a viewpoint might be had by completely disregarding Korean translation. Visitors from Korea can explore the mosque if they follow the prayer times and stay out of the restricted areas (Chuah, 2012).

However, Itaewon's Korean citizens have shown a very unfavorable attitude toward Muslims in the area. Lee Heesu claims that Korean citizens view the Muslim minority as business competition and even a foreign colonizer who has compromised the region's security (Lee N, 253). The Muslim co-residents are referred to as "Arabs" by Korean locals, who do not seem to need to clarify their nationality or ethnicity (Lee N, 253). In other words, the perception that Muslim residents do not have as many neighbors as foreign invaders is influenced by the Korean residents' feeling of economic threat. Notably, these same Korean citizens do not react with anxiety to the emergence of other foreign competitors in the food industry, including Thai restaurants, French fusion restaurants, and Mexican restaurants nearby. Instead, Muslim businesses face negative perceptions, whereas non-Muslim firms are welcomed. Ironically, many prosperous Muslim eateries are run by Korean business people, as is the case with the Taj Mahal, owned by Mr. Suh (Song, 2019).

Likewise, there have been many halal enterprises around Seoul Central Mosque. Due to the increasing demand for halal businesses, the Korean government is spending substantial money on various tourism-related areas (Koo, 2018). Hence, the varying waves of tourism to Korea, beginning with Japanese visitors and continuing with tourists from other countries (Chae et al., 2015). As this wave wanes, China and other nations try to develop strategies for attracting travelers from Muslim-majority nations. Since the halal market is the largest in the world, Many Korean enterprises believe that Muslim consumers are worth around US$ 5.73 trillion and serve an estimated 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide. The gap created by Chinese visitors can be filled by tourism (Bae, 2007). Korea has made significant efforts to draw affluent Muslims who are heavily involved in a wave of Hallyu, K-beauty, and K-food in promoting Korea as a globalized and cosmopolitan place that is particularly open to Muslim travelers. It is noteworthy that

popular K-drama filming locations like Nami Island now have a Korea Muslim Federation-approved halal restaurant where Muslim tourists can enjoy Korean food (Baker, 2006).

Even though it is acknowledged that Korea would greatly benefit from entering the halal market, the internal Islamophobia of the nation has created hostile conditions. As a result, such attempts to launch businesses that cater to the halal market have been met with protests and harsh opposition, especially from Christian communities. For instance, the former Park Administration intended to build a halal food complex in the Iksan, Jeollabuk-do province's Korea National Food Cluster 2015. However, this idea was opposed by Evangelical Christian groups as a strategy for Islam to infiltrate Korean society through halal cuisine, according to works by researchers like Kim Nam Ill (2016).

Despite the institution representing Korean Muslims, Islamophobia in South Korea is prevalent. It is primarily a behavior developed through inadequate media representation, contrary to Islamophobia in Western countries, which is somewhat tied to colonization. It is crucial to emphasize that there is a more significant problem with hate speech in Korean culture about Islamophobia. According to experts, the formation of unfavorable impressions of Islam and Muslims in Korean society is attributed to many circumstances, such as the media's portrayal of Muslims and Islam, the general misunderstanding of Muslim affairs, the Influence of specific Christian organizations, and general prejudice against other cultures (Ahn, 2008).

It is, therefore, crucial to examine the particulars of Islamophobia in the Korean context that give rise to these unfavorable opinions. Islamophobia in the Korean context is primarily a behavior developed through inadequate media representation, in contrast to Islamophobia in Western countries, which is somewhat tied to colonization. According to Koo (2018), since the 2014 ISIS attacks, Islamophobia has increased frequently throughout Korean society. In addition, she contends that Muslims with dual citizenship are frequently the focus of Islamophobia in Korea. This is hardly surprising that most Muslims in Korea are immigrants. However, Koo (2018) and Eum (2017) pointed out that Islamophobic attitudes also target Korean Muslims, particularly women who convert to Islam and then put on the headscarf as a symbol of their newfound faith. Both experts recorded instances in which Korean Muslim women have been fired from their employment. In addition, some have experienced assault or have been subjected to prejudice because of their Islamic beliefs. In a related study, Jeong (2017) discovered that Korean Islamophobia is conceptualized in terms of religion rather than as a concern about economic hardship brought on by Muslim immigration, as is frequently stressed in Western contexts. Another degree of complexity was added when Jang Don-Jin and Choi Won-Jae (2012) discovered that a lack of engagement, curiosity, and understanding about Muslims fueled Islamophobia in Korea.

Thus, "multicultural literacy" should be acknowledged as a space for "hegemonic accommodation/reception" in urban settings and for the compromise of several cultural distinctions. Itaewon should have a unique function in this conception (Kim, 2005). With the Itaewon district in charge, it is possible to blur cultural boundaries and expand cultural reception capacity. Currently, Itaewon's Muslim community serves as a welcoming urban area for intercultural communication between Koreans who are Muslims and those who are not. The two factions must, however, work out several difficulties and compromises (Cho, 2010). The Muslim community in Itaewon offers a valuable forum for resolving the conflict arising from prejudice and cultural misunderstanding, which is increasingly common in Europe. Many European nations are further enmeshing themselves in the chasm of misunderstanding and enmity by alienating the Muslims who already dwell there. A host culture cannot hope to be stable if it rejects other cultures, especially if those other cultures have already established roots in the area's geography (Lee, 2009). It is impossible to abruptly and foolishly stop cultural existence. However, neither should one dismiss the fact that it exists. Whether Koreans like it or not, Muslim culture is firmly entrenched in modern Korean life and has a significant historical presence in Korea (Cho, 2010).

Dissecting Korean Nationalism through the Concept of Imagined Communities

Benedict Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political group — and imagined as both intrinsically limited and sovereign" in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). A nation is imagined because even the smallest nation's citizens will never know most of their fellow citizens, see them, or even hear of them, yet the picture of their communion in each life. No nation imagines itself coterminous with humanity. Therefore, even the largest of them, including maybe a billion living humans, has finite, if elastic, bounds beyond which other nations lie.

The sovereign state is the gauge and emblem of this freedom. The idea was developed when the Enlightenment and Revolution undermined the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical, royal realm. Nations "dream of becoming free, and if under God, directly so." Finally, he asserts that "the nation is always understood as a deep, horizontal comradeship, notwithstanding the inequity and exploitation that may occur in each. Ultimately, this brotherhood has enabled millions of people over the past two centuries to willingly die for such constrained fantasies rather than merely commit murder. According to Anderson, the dynastic and religious community cultural systems are the origins of nationalism.

Table 1. Dissecting Korean Nationalism Through The Concept Of Imagined Communities

CONCEPTS	ORIGINAL MEANING	KOREAN CONTEXT
LIMITED	*"The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations."*	Koreans still strongly feel ethnic homogeneity based on common genealogy (ethnicity), blood, and geography, and nationalism is still essential in Korean politics and international affairs.
SOVEREIGN	*"The imagined community is sovereign because its legitimacy is not derived from divinity as kingship is—the nation is its own authority, it is founded in its own name, and it invents its own people which it deems citizens."*	The Koreans established a unitary country to demonstrate their autonomy and uniqueness in the face of imperialist incursions. In defining the Korean nation, they placed more emphasis on the ethnic foundation than on civic components.

Limited and Sovereign

Based on their common blood and ancestry, Koreans have grown to feel like a country. By adopting a shared prehistoric origin theory, the Korean people were "racialized," creating a strong sense of national unity. Race is typically considered a collectivity defined by innate and unchanging phenotypic and genotypic features. At the same time, ethnicity is a cultural phenomenon based on a shared language and history (Ji, 2011). However, Koreans have yet to distinguish between the two traditionally. Instead, race was a distinguishing factor that boosted ethnic identity, crucial in defining the country. As a result, Koreans consider themselves members of a "unitary country" (danil minjok), which is genetically and ethnically distinct.

Korean Nationalism

Historically, South Korea has taken great satisfaction in having a linguistically, culturally, and racially homogeneous society. Being mono-cultural, mono-ethnic, and monolingual are crucial components of "Koreanness," which Koreans call national identity. After 30 years of Japanese colonization and the Korean War, which divided the country by agreement between external entities like the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Korean nationalism has grown to represent Korean pride, independence, freedom, and unity (Ji, 2011).
Koreans cannot wholly embrace diversity and multiculturalism due to their longstanding nationalism and ethnocentrism. On the one hand, it unites Koreans under the accepted understanding of what it is to be Korean, acting as a potential unifying factor (Lee, 2002). To put it another way, it is thought that the persistent nationalism and ethnocentrism of the Korean people have held them in their current state in a changing world. Portraying refugees, immigrants, migrant laborers, and non-Koreans as "Other" and a threat to the long-term survival of their nation discourages Koreans from completely embracing diversity. Because of their nationalistic ideology, which leads them to believe that their culture and identity must be safeguarded from other forces, Koreans' xenophobia is heightened. Moreover, since many Koreans think they live in a time of globalization, they are hesitant, if not hostile, to be "mixed" with people of different races and nationalities (Appiah, 2006).

Conclusion

There is anti-Islam solid sentiment in Korea toward the Seoul Central Mosque. This sentiment is rooted in nationalism due to the Taliban's abduction of Koreans in Afghanistan and the 9/11 attacks. The Seoul Central Mosque may indicate that Koreans are slowly accepting Islam. In addition, the Islam mosque in Itaewon is essential in fostering relationships between Koreans interested in Islam. However, in some cases, Korea is very interested in Muslim operations because it wants to access the global halal markets to grow its economic activities. Although it can be difficult for Korean Muslims to identify their position in society, they may be able to support broader global concerns by speaking Korean well and reducing cultural and sociological gaps and misconceptions between Muslims and the larger Korean population.

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