1 Under male supervision?

Nationality, age and Islamic belief as basis for Muslim women's pilgrimage

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Introduction

'Saudi Arabia turns back 1,000 female pilgrims from Nigeria' headlines CNN in September 2012. The newspaper article informs its readers:

Saudi law requires each female pilgrim under the age of 45 years to have a male sponsor during the pilgrimage journey, regardless of nationality. "This rule is applied to all women in general who want to get an entry visa to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj," pilgrimage ministry spokesman Hatim bin Hassan Qadhi said in the statement. (...) [T]he women were actually accompanied by male escorts, but (..) the checking system at the Jeddah airport was such that men were checked, cleared and asked to proceed.

This newspaper clipping highlights that: (1) female pilgrims from all over the world are required to enter Saudi Arabia with an eligible male chaperone; (2) this condition becomes especially relevant on a formal level for citizens who need a visa to enter Saudi Arabia; and (3) female pilgrims who exceed a certain age are excluded from the regulation. These regulations imply favouring particular categories of people and limiting others when it comes to the performance of Muslim pilgrimage. Given this as a starting point, this chapter wants to examine which role gender, religion, age and nationality – understood as social status positions – play in the context of hajj (pilgrimage) and umra (the 'minor' or voluntary pilgrimage). Using an intersectionality approach to compare the stories of women from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Malaysia, the two guiding questions will be: Under which conditions do the identifications, categories and practices of gender, religion, age and nationality lead to restrictions or privileges for certain categories of people when it comes to the performance of Muslim pilgrimage? In what way do these identifications, categories and practices intersect with one another, that is, when and how do some of them have more impact than others?

To anticipate, many of the pilgrimage rituals (see introduction) can be either performed or experienced differently by women and men (Thimm, forthcoming). This chapter will only deal with the regulation that women have to be accompanied by a male chaperone (*mahram*), whereas men do not face similar restraints. This chaperone is defined as a close male relative to whom the female pilgrim is in a relationship that excludes marriage. The Nigerian women pushed back from Saudi Arabia, introduced at the beginning, were accused of not being accompanied by such a male guardian. The requirement for women to be under male supervision during pilgrimage is subject to the visa rules and regulations issued by the Saudi Arabian government, which may be in agreement or disagreement with the particular Islamic interpretation the believers themselves follow. As these conditions intersect and cannot be discussed as isolated from one another, I will examine how they co-constitute each other by turning to the stories by three women related to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Malaysia that exemplify some of these entanglements.

Women's perspectives, let alone gendered or even intersectional perspectives, have not yet been adequately analyzed regarding the hajj and umra. Only a very few articles or book chapters deal with detailed nuances of gendered aspects of Muslim pilgrimage (Sayeed 2016; Werbner 2015; Honaripisheh 2013; Cooper 2012; Young 1993; Tapper 1990), but scholarship has so far lacked a systematic approach. Some historical approaches deal with women's travelogues, mostly written by aristocratic women, but they do not necessarily apply a gender lens (e.g. Mahallati 2011; Johnson 2000).¹ In fact, encompassing works dealing with Muslim pilgrims (e.g. Arjana 2017, Tagliacozzo 2013) tend to neglect women's perspectives and describe men's practices such as wearing the two white unstitched pieces of cloth (*kain ihram* in Malay) as valid for both genders – thus ignoring parts of women's life worlds during pilgrimage (Thimm, forthcoming). With this overall dearth of scholarship, it is not surprising that going beyond an examination of gender issues, that is, applying an intersectional approach which examines gender as entangled with other axes of differentiation and identification, is a fortiori lacking in research on Muslim pilgrimage.

The academic void concerning gender issues in pilgrimage studies is especially true for Muslim pilgrimage but is relativized when broadening the scope of religion. In fact, research on Christian pilgrimage addressing gender issues has been published since a couple of years. In this academic literature, Christian pilgrimage gets primarily located in Europe. A volume edited by cultural anthropologists Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (2012) analyze connections between pilgrimage, gender, the nation-state and transnationalism in the context of different European regions and countries. The focus is on regional and transnational groups visiting holy shrines and how the subjects regard these sites as materialized markers of identity. In her dissertation, cultural anthropologist Judith Samson (2012) works on the shrine of Mary in the Netherlands and in Poland. She examines how different groups of pilgrims negotiate gender and European identifications

at these shrines. Samson is especially interested in how women and men relate to the Virgin Mary in the context of European nation-building discourses. Sanne Derks (2009), likewise a cultural anthropologist, analyzes how Christian female and male pilgrims from Bolivia draw on their faith in order to handle experiences of oppression. Derks connects this condition, *inter alia*, to gender. Film and theatre scholar Vanessa Baker (2010) examines with a performance optic how female Catholic pilgrims in Crete, Malta and Rome constitute gendered spiritual identifications and how they allocate meaning to these identifications through their performative practices. Similar studies of gendered practices and meanings are lacking in the study of Muslim pilgrimage. This chapter aims at (1) filling the gap by examining social practices, wishes and thoughts by Muslim women in this regard; and (2) thinking beyond gender by including other axes of identification as basis for gendered pilgrimage. An analysis of the entanglement of different status positions can be fruitfully undertaken with the framework of intersectionality.

The introductory newspaper clipping underlined that women with any nationality who need a visa to enter Saudi Arabia have to be accompanied by a male chaperone (*mahram*, see below for details) until they reach the age of 45. Gender, nationality/citizenship and age all intertwine in the differentiated effect of this regulation on pilgrims. These socio-culturally constructed categories are just some of many possible axes of identification and differentiation that can deeply shape people's life worlds and practices on the transnational, national, institutional, social and individual scales (Chaudhuri, Thimm and Mahler 2019; Thimm, Chaudhuri and Mahler 2017; Mahler, Chaudhuri, and Patil 2015). In the early beginnings of feminist research in the 1970s and the 1980s, the focus was very much on women's positions and perspectives. A more inclusive approach studying relations between different genders from women and men to transgender developed in the 1990s and 2000s. Analysing gender identification as a separate category, as was customary in the 1970s and 1980s, was criticized by so-called Third Wave feminists – Women of Colour and Black feminists² in the US – already in the 1980s as an artificial approach which maintains White supremacy by ignoring the life worlds of Black women. The intersectional approach which was developed in response has been debated ever since. The main issue is how we can best understand socio-cultural categories and practices as mutually constitutive rather than isolated (Crenshaw 2019, 1989; Shields 2008; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Brah and Phoenix 2004; hooks 2000, 1981). One backbone of this approach is the demonstration of and insistence on racialized women being discriminated through powerful structures and the struggle against this condition. In this sense, intersectionality has always been a political activist agenda ('political intersectionality') and an analytical tool to examine mutually constitutive axes of identification ('structural intersectionality'). Whereas the stem of research and activism in this field is grounded in Black feminist struggle and thought, taking Muslim identifications as an intersecting vector with

gender as a starting point has not yet been undertaken in intersectionality research, even though the political necessity is obvious since anti-Muslim racism in the West has become significantly stronger since the early 2000s.

The intersectionality framework will serve in this chapter as a valuable tool to examine female's conditions and experiences from different generations, with different citizenships/residency status (Saudi Arabian, Emirati and Malaysian) and who follow different strands of Islam (either Sunni or Shi'i and a certain *madhhab* – Islamic law school – therein) and their relatedness of the various categories to one another. Before I turn to the analysis of women's stories about their hajj experiences, in what follows, I will first give a brief overview of the methods and methodology I adopted for my research. Next, background information on requirements for females regarding Muslim pilgrimage (hajj and umra) will be provided. The subsequent empirically driven section will then showcase intersectionally interwoven conditions for women performing hajj and umra coming from different nationstates.

The context of this study is a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina with or without stopovers undertaken by Malay Malaysians and by Emiratis. This study is based on an ethnographic multi-sited (Marcus 1995) approach to fieldwork, data collection and analysis between December 2013 and April 2018 for a total of 14 months. This multi-sited approach implies doing fieldwork in diverse but connected places – in this case in Malaysia and in the UAE where some Malaysians do a spiritual and leisure stopover on the pilgrimage journey. Based on principles of multi-sited fieldwork, I 'followed the people' from Malaysia to Dubai and back on their so-called 'umrah&ziarah Dubai' journeys, as they are called in Malaysia; packages that are part of the local tourism industry (Thimm 2017). Not being a Muslim myself and hence not allowed to enter Mecca and Medina according to Islamic regulations, I have not followed my respondents to these two places. Apart from this research phase, this study additionally draws on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Malay Archipelago between 2009 and 2013 for a research on transnational mobility and gender (Thimm 2014).

In sum, 277 qualitative interviews, discussions and conversations in various forms and lengths with 217 people have been conducted between 2013 and 2018. However, not all of these interviews focused on experiences of Meccan pilgrimage but related to broader research questions. The interviews were primarily open and narrative and all of them were transcribed. Some of these interviews were recorded, some were not. In the latter cases, I took notes with verbatim statements of my respondents. Interviews were conducted either in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay), English or local *Manglish* (a mixture between both languages).

Haneefah, Arwa and Rabihah: women's stories on hajj and umra

My 36-year-old Malay Malaysian respondent Haneefah was born and raised in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The reason why she grew up there is because

her paternal grandmother set forth from Malaysia to Mecca in 1962 at the age of 15 shortly after her marriage to her cousin whose mother's deep desire was to perform hajj during her remaining years. Ever since, the family has lived in Mecca. Yet, Haneefah herself left Saudi Arabia for Malaysia in 2000 when she was 19 years old. During our conversations in 2017, she remembers that in the 1980s, her grandmother and her aunt usually went on hajj and umra (umrah in Malay) without their husbands or any other male company but with other female friends. Haneefah's mother performed the pilgrimage on a regular basis too. Ever since Haneefah was young, her mother performed the annual hajj as long as her health condition allowed it. Haneefah herself never understood this regular performance – that is to say, not until she moved to Malaysia. Once there she realized the implication of the 'hajj quota' system which in the Malaysian context means having to wait for decades for one's turn to go on hajj. As formal residents in Saudi Arabia, Haneefah and her mother, however, were not subject to regulations with regard to the frequency or time of pilgrimage performance – be it hajj or umra. She recalled that only at a later point of time the Saudi Arabian government launched a regulation that residents of the country are allowed to perform hajj only once or twice every five years. Haneefah herself performed hajj three times during her youth. Performing umra was the standard program every Saturday after waking up, initiated by her mother, as Haneefah told me:

I started to be very annoyed by it. Every Saturday, my mum woke me up very early, then we put on our clothes, performed umra, came back and had our breakfast. I mean when I was a youngster, of course I was more interested in doing other things on the weekends than going on umra again and again!

Experiencing pilgrimage as a weekly routine, Haneefa did not develop the kind of 'longing' for Mecca that can be observed among many believing Muslims all over the world. Instead, what for most Muslims would be an extraordinary experience, in her case became something ordinary. For residents of Mecca like Haneefah, the pilgrimage was nothing special. But was there anything special about being a *female* resident regarding the performance of pilgrimage? Asking her about the practices by women residing in Saudi Arabia regarding the regulation to be accompanied by a *mahram*, for example, she laughed as she replied:

Well, even though we don't need any visa which is the point where the requirement of a *mahram* is officially checked and controlled, we still need a *mahram* because it's overall a religious requirement. We always performed pilgrimage, both hajj and 'umra with a *mahram* because, in the end, it's normal to roam around the city with a male counterpart who's responsible for us. In the end, you need a driver, and he will be the *mahram*, the bodyguard then! Without a driver you don't get to the Al-Haram mosque anyway.

This excerpt shows that Haneefah followed a twofold pragmatic approach: on the one hand, she accepts the need of a male companion when a big distance is to be covered. On the other hand, she emphasizes the capacity to perfectly move around alone for shorter distances when being accompanied by a *mahram*. Both approaches inform her view on the *mahram* stipulation and influence her everyday gendered mobilities. Haneefah's older brother was the one who usually served both as a *mahram* and as a driver for her mother and herself. Religious regulations and pragmatic factors combine at this point. After some years her brother started to complain about accompanying his mother again for her annual hajj objecting to the responsibility and being obliged to perform every single ritual together with her.

Only around 1,500 kilometres away from Mecca lives my 27-year-old Emirati respondent Arwa. She comes from Sharjah, one of the seven emirates of the UAE located at the west coast between the emirates of Dubai and Ajman. In December 2017, I met her for the first time at her workplace at a university library in Dubai. She has not yet been on hajj but she has performed umra twice: the first time was in 2015, the second time only two months before we first met. Having her coffee from a mug with the Arab lettering 'I ♥ Mekka' on it, she remembered this recent journey as follows: 'I went with my family, we were a group of women only. I went with my aunties and cousins, we didn't go with a *mahram*.' I showed surprise and was interested in the reasons for this women-only group. Arwa explained that as Emirati citizens, they do not need any visa to enter Saudi Arabia:

We can just cross the border back and forth. And my family was fine about going without a *mahram*. My auntie just said that we need to go with a female family member who is above 45 years old, then it's fine. My brothers are younger and they are still studying, so they didn't come with us. And my dad didn't have time because of work. It was a sudden decision to go for umra; someone just asked "Shall we go?". And then, one week later, we just went to Mecca.

Arwa continued by emphasizing that she does not have many male relatives. Her rare male cousins are below 20 years old and her father, for example, does not want to take Arwa with him on his own pilgrimage since usually Emiratis, according to Arwa, consider it as distracting one from one's spirituality to have kids with them. The age of her cousins is a signifier not only for different priorities that the young men might have had but also for how family relationships are experienced in terms of gender and age: formally, the age of the *mahram* is not of importance as a son or cousin under 20 years of age could act as a perfect *mahram*. But this young age of the males in contrast to the much elder age of the females might have affected the use or mobilization of a *mahram*: the women preferred

to perform pilgrimage without the young male relatives rather than being accompanied by them in order to stick to rules or regulations.

Later during our conversation, Arwa and I discussed her understanding of *ziyāra*, the third form of pilgrimage (see introduction). She revealed that her mother is Shi'i Muslim and her father a Sunni. The majority of Muslims in the UAE are Sunni and she feels that talking about Shi'i identification is very sensitive. Two weeks later, we met again and I asked her whether there was any connection between being Shi'i and performing umra amongst females only. Indeed, as her female relatives as Shi'i women considered their journey to be safe and did not expect to face any risks, she said, they could just go on umra without any *mahram*. She added:

But my auntie also asked aunties in Saudi Arabia whether we can go. She said "I'm 45, can we go?" And maybe she also told them "I don't have an older boy and my husband doesn't come with me..." They said "You can go."

Arwa explained that the aunties her aunt referred to were Islamic clerics in Mecca. As Sunni Islam is the official religion in Saudi Arabia, these clerics were certainly Sunni Muslims and not Shi'a. In adopting a strategy to perform the pilgrimage, Arwa's female relatives creatively appropriated structural positioning to their own benefit, thus pinpointing to the importance of adopting a constructive approach to intersectionality to study the agency of research participants.

Shifting the focus from the Arabian Peninsula to Malaysia, there is Rabi-hah, a woman in her early 40s, who works as a lecturer at a private university in the capital Kuala Lumpur. In August 2017, she happily told me that she plans to perform her first umra in three months time. She planned to go on the journey with a travel agency which is based in the state of Johor because her brother works with that travel agency as *mutawwif*, a religious guide for the pilgrims. Rabi-hah's husband will not accompany her because he has performed the umra twice already and will take care of their 7- and 12-year-old children instead. The couple agreed that it is now 'her turn to go.' This issue of equal gender opportunities is revealing about gender relations and expectations over the course of the time. In the past, men have gone on pilgrimage more often than women, and furthermore most people took it for granted that the woman would take care of the kids during the man's absence.

I asked Rabi-hah with whom she would perform her pilgrimage. 'I will go with my brother as my *mahram*,' she replied. Rabi-hah emphasized that her brother would only function as such for the visa procedure and that she would be alone during the trip because certainly, she is not in need to be taken care of by her brother. 'I also travelled alone to Melbourne last year, there was no *mahram* there, so no problem of course!' I was interested to

know from her perspective what the function of the *mahram* is considering that her brother would not accompany her throughout the whole journey. She responded:

The *mahram* takes care of the family member, especially in the ancient time. Saudi Arabia is still using this rule. The contemporary fiqh [Islamic jurisprudence] actually says that you don't need a *mahram* if your travel is safe. But respecting the Saudi rules, I have no issue with it. It is culturally based, it's not Islamic ruling.

Rabihah presents herself as an independent woman who does not need a *mahram*. The only reason why she is accompanied by one is the corresponding requirement by the Saudi Arabian government. Her statement about travelling alone to Melbourne provides insight in how she feels about the Saudi Arabian regulation. She also appears to be proud of the way in which she manages to settle the issue and contest the rule by stating that once in Saudi Arabia, she will not need her brother.

Intersectional performances of Muslim pilgrimage

How can we analyze the three stories with an intersectionality lens? Between 1982 and 2007, Haneefah grew up as a resident from abroad (Malaysia) in Mecca, which, together with Medina, is one of the two cities in Saudi Arabia which Muslims perceive as holy. In the first place, living in Mecca enables its inhabitants to perform pilgrimage – hajj and umra alike – as often as they like and under self-chosen conditions. Since, according to Islamic understanding, only Muslims are allowed to enter Mecca and Medina, all residents of Mecca are, at least officially, Muslim. Yet the way Islamic practices and rituals, such as pilgrimage, are performed by these Muslims is not predefined but open to personal wishes, needs and possibilities. Haneefah comes from a parental home with a very pious mother who follows Sunni Islam. Both Haneefah and her mother performed pilgrimage regularly: they conducted the umra together every week, and while Haneefah performed the hajj twice, her mother did so annually. Performing the pilgrimage so frequently was unique to inhabitants of Mecca until today and to residents of Saudi Arabia until 2008.

Up to three million pilgrims from all over the world perform hajj every year and the number of pilgrims tends to rise annually. This tremendous gathering in and around Mecca results in polluted air, jammed roads, accidents and relatively high death toll among pilgrims (Bianchi 2017). To regulate these difficulties, in 2008 the Saudi Arabian government introduced, among other things, rules that target the frequency of pilgrimage performance of residents of Saudi Arabia, as Haneefah mentioned in her narration. The launch of these rules was introduced in the campaign 'No Hajj Without Permission' which aimed to reduce the number of domestic

pilgrims by implementing a limitation for them to perform hajj only once every five years. The Ministry of Interior controls this endeavour by issuing permissions which are checked at the *mīqāt*, the entry points to the Holy Land such as certain mosques, where the pilgrim's state of consecration begins with the formulation of their intention (*nīya*; *niat* in Malay) to perform their pilgrimage. As stated in the local Saudi newspaper *Arab News*, all local pilgrims are carefully checked at the *mīqāt* and those without permission are denied any access to Mecca:

Failure to possess a permit for hajj may result in you being turned back by the security authorities. (...) Pilgrims won't be allowed entry to the holy capital without the appropriate permission, as security checkpoints at all entrances to the city will apply procedures of investigation, verification and seizure of violators, referring them to the appropriate authorities to apply regulations against them.

(Arab News 2018)

In 2018, 52,000 permits were issued to domestic pilgrims. Although officially every local person who wants to perform hajj must obtain such a permit, in practice this requirement is only applicable for locals living outside Mecca, allowing a loophole for local residents of Mecca such as Haneefah's mother. In a chat I had with a Saudi in his 40s during a shopping tour in Dubai, he revealed:

Saudis are only allowed to perform hajj once every five years which is the internal quota in order to control the mass of people. But I live in Mecca and I can say that I'm happy because it doesn't concern me at all! When I want to perform hajj, I just only put on my white cloth for pilgrimage and that's it! Just going there from home! It's easy for me. Because I don't need to pass any *mīqāt*, don't need to pass any point of control where the security guys could see that I've performed hajj already within the last 5 years. So I always go on hajj every year.

Apparently, the structuration and realization of pilgrimage for Saudis and foreigners living in Saudi Arabia is highly based on one's own interpretations of Islamic rules and regulations and not on institutional guidelines. This is still valid for those living in Mecca itself, whereas Saudi residents from outside Mecca have to follow the quota but are still relatively free in any other matters of the performance of pilgrimage.

This condition grounded in the nationality or legal residential status is furthermore of interest in terms of how it intertwines with gender. As Haneefah pointed out in her narration, there was no official control of herself and her mother to ascertain them being accompanied by a *mahram*. Nevertheless, they always performed their pilgrimage, no matter whether hajj or umra,

with Haneefah's elder brother as a male chaperone. This practice is rooted in their personal interpretations of certain Islamic stipulations.

Haneefah and her family were highly influenced by the Saudi Arabian state direction of Islam which is Sunni Islam following Hanbalite law school (*madhhab*) of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The Hanbalite law school is one of the four *madhhab* of Sunni Islam, the other ones being Hanafite, Shafi'ite and Maliki. All Sunni law schools have their own interpretations about how to handle the Islamic sources (Qur'an and hadith, the deeds and sayings of prophet Muhammad). In fact, the Hanbalite law school is the most conservative one; unlike the other law schools, its founder, Ibn Hanbal (780–855), did not allow any analogous interpretations (*qiyās*) of the Qur'an. The reason is that he questioned the idea that human rationality could be more valid than divine revelation (Ansary 2010, 118f). Regarding the performance of pilgrimage by women, the Hanbalite school, similar to the Hanafite school, follows the interpretation that all women have to be accompanied by a *maḥram*, regardless of their age.

This regulation led to the frustration by Haneefah's elder brother who had to go on hajj regularly, no matter whether it was his own wish or not, as it was his duty to serve as *maḥram* for his mother and sister. In this case of Haneefah's family, the demand to perform pilgrimage with a *maḥram* became a nuisance if not a burden for the brother, a teenager who is not willing to spend his time on recurrent pilgrimage tours. Haneefah's brother got bored by having to accompany his mother and sister. Considering the fact that he is an adolescent who is in charge of taking care of his mother, being responsible for her and functioning as 'bodyguard' as Haneefah put it, the rule to be supervised by a male as a female feels awkward if not ridiculous to him. This relates to the condition that in terms of family relationships, he is not superior to his mother so that it feels difficult for all actors to be forced into this gendered relationship. Thus, the *maḥram* issue is not only a matter of religious orientation but also, if not above all, a family matter which is underpinned religiously-theologically. The age of the *maḥram* is of impact on how the women (and the *maḥram* themselves) feel about having to depend on them.

This intersection of gender with citizenship/legal residential status, family rules and religious orientation gets complemented by age in other regional and national contexts. Arwa, my Emirati respondent who performed the umra in 2015 and 2017, holds a passport which allows her to enter the neighbouring country Saudi Arabia without any visa requirements. Besides, for the UAE, this regulation is only valid for the three GCC states – Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman.³ This opens up the possibility for Arwa and her female relatives to travel to Saudi Arabia for the umra without any point of control regarding being accompanied by a *maḥram*.

However, GCC nationals must obtain the official hajj permit to enter Saudi Arabia so that the performance of this compulsory pilgrimage is still bound to official stipulations. Going on hajj as a UAE citizen means having

to apply for a permit at the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (*Awqāf*). Twenty thousand UAE nationals applied in 2017, out of which 6,228 were approved. This equalled a rise of Emirati pilgrims of 25% compared to the previous year (*Gulf News* 2017). But even for the hajj, Emirati citizens enjoy certain advantages on the administrative level, for example, they are eligible to book so-called 'Express hajj packages' enabling them to arrive in Mecca directly before hajj starts and to leave straight afterwards.⁴ For Arwa and her women-only group, going on umra as UAE national meant that the women did not have to take care of any state rules but only of their own interpretation of Islam. Arwa's maternal side of the family belongs to the Shi'i strand of Islam, according to which groups of female pilgrims can perform the umra without a *mahram*.

Demands for women with regard to being accompanied by a male chaperone differ for Shi'i Muslims from Sunni Muslims. The two main law schools of Shi'i Islam, Imami and Zaidite, do not follow the Sunni Hanbalite and Hanafite understanding of the general company of a *mahram* as a precondition for women performing hajj or umra. Even though the Zaidite strand formulates that women below the age of 45 do need a *mahram*, it does not enforce this principle. The Imamis even do not regard a *mahram* as obligatory at all. The important issue for Shi'i Muslims is, however, the degree of safety of the women's journey. Only when it is considered safe are females allowed to perform the pilgrimage without a male chaperone (Sayeed 2016, 68; Mahallati 2011, 832). The way how to realize this in social practice is not further defined. Hence, since Arwa and her female relatives do not require a visa to enter Saudi Arabia based on their nationality, there is no material checkpoint for them where a possible obligation of having a *mahram* would be checked. Instead, and similar to Haneefah and her mother, they only need to follow their own Islamic understanding regarding the issue of a *mahram*. As one of Arwa's aunts was over 45 years old, she took over the responsibility and actually served as the *mahram* in the sense of the protecting guardian. Interestingly, being unsure about having the freedom to do so, this aunt consulted female Sunni scholars in Saudi Arabia regarding this matter. These Saudi religious scholars regarded the group travelling without a *mahram* as unproblematic. According to the Saudi Arabian visa regulation, a woman over the age of 45 may travel without a *mahram*, but only on condition that she travels with an organized group and that she can provide an official letter from her *mahram*, signed by a notary, stating that he has no objection and authorizes her to travel. Since Arwa and her group do not pass any immigration checkpoints, there is no point for them to be asked for this kind of letter. Therefore, they can ignore this regulation – and the Saudi Arabian 'aunties' do so too.

Notably, the advice of the aunties that Arwa and her female relatives could travel to perform the umra without any male company contradicts Hanbalite jurisprudence. However, in 2014, this Hanbalite, that is, religious, regulation was eased institutionally by the Saudi government. In

2013, a committee formed by the Ministry of Minority Affairs recommended to the government to allow women above the age of 45 to perform pilgrimage without a *maḥram* as long as they travel in a group of at least four. Based on this suggestion, Saudi Arabia changed the hajj guidelines accordingly (*The Indian Express* 2018).

This shows two facts: first, the obligation for women to perform pilgrimage with a *maḥram* only until they reach the age of 45 is already an ease of state regulations. Before that and following Islamic Hanbalite interpretation, all women, regardless of their age, were required to be accompanied by a male chaperone. That this rule was not checked until Saudi Arabia started to professionalize, industrialize and commercialize the hajj will not be of further discussion here (see Thimm 2017 for details). Second, the ‘aunties,’ in fact the female Islamic scholars based in Saudi Arabia, give out their advice in accordance with state policies rather than with interpretations based on Islamic principles. However, since for Arwa and her female relatives the male companionship only depends on the interpretation of the belief system, their GCC nationality functions as a loophole for their mobility.

The intersectionally interwoven net of conditions for women to perform pilgrimage is rather different for those requiring a visa to enter Saudi Arabia, as is the case for Rabiḥah from Malaysia, for example. By the time of my meetings with Rabiḥah in Kuala Lumpur, she was close to performing her first umra. She lives in a country in which Malay Muslims, as Rabiḥah is, form the majority of the population. Malaysia is a multicultural society where almost 69% of the citizens are classified as *Bumiputera* (Malays and native people, such as *Orang Asli* or *Kadazandusun*), 23% of Chinese ancestry and 7% of Indian ancestry (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2016). According to the Malaysian constitution, Sunni Islam, following the Shafi’ite law school, is the official religion of the state and the compulsory religion for all Malay Muslims (Federal Constitution, article 3 [1]; article 160).⁵ Hence, the government established Islam as the religion for the majority society and grants special protection to this religion. On the basis of Islamization processes and professionalization of Muslim pilgrimage since the 1970s, performing hajj and umra is a huge issue for the majority of Malay Malaysian Muslims (Thimm 2017). The numbers of pilgrims are increasing but when it comes to hajj, they are restricted by the number of visas that the Saudi Arabian government issues to every nation-state. In the case of Malaysia, in 2016, 22,230 visas were issued. In 2017, the number rose up to 27,999. Numbers for umra do not yet exist since monitoring was only established in 2014 by the Monitoring Council (*Majlis Kawal Selia Umrab*) and their data is not yet available.

Individual travel for the purpose of pilgrimage is exclusively possible through local travel agencies which are approved by the Saudi Arabian government. According to the Saudi Arabian visa regulations:

Women and children are required to be accompanied by their husband/father or a male relative [*maḥram*] and proof of relationship is required

for the umrah [Malay spelling, VT] visa or hajj visa to be granted. This could be a marriage certificate for a wife or a birth certificate which includes the name of both parents for a child. The *maḥram* must travel into and out of Saudi Arabia on the same flight as his wife and children.⁶

The marriage or birth certificate is handed in, in Rabihah's case, by her brother and his agency. The requirement to be accompanied by the *maḥram* when entering the country and passing the immigration was one official reason why the Nigerian women introduced in the beginning were turned back in 2012 when their *maḥram* already passed through and were therefore no longer together with their female relatives. The mentioned certificates to be shown upon visa application refer to differentiated specifications on who can serve as a *maḥram* for the purpose of women's pilgrimage. In a brochure of Ibn Ziyad,⁷ Malaysia's biggest travel agency, for example, prospective pilgrims can read that a daughter aged below 45 and a son aged below 18 are to be accompanied by the father. A wife can be accompanied by the husband, female siblings aged below 45 and male siblings aged below 18 by male siblings aged 18 or above, a granddaughter by the maternal or paternal grandfather. If the female daughter, sibling or granddaughter is aged below 15 and the male son, sibling or grandson is aged below 13, then the mother also has to follow the kid or teenager. The rules are further explained for niece, stepchild and adopted child. Hence, the room for interpretation is extremely low for females (and male children) when it comes to the question how to handle the issue of being accompanied by a *maḥram*.

In Rabihah's case it becomes clear that her *maḥram* only functions as fulfilling rules issued by the Saudi Arabian government and controlled by the process of entering the country via booked travel packages. From Rabihah's own Islamic perspective, she sees no need to be supervised by a man on her travels, no matter whether she goes on holiday, business trip or pilgrimage. This self-confident stance as a woman corresponds with the viewpoint of her law school. Rabihah, a university lecturer in her early 40s, who earns her own income, arranges her family life and travels regularly for reasons of leisure or business, is quite capable to undertake her pilgrimage journey without any male supervision. Based on her citizenship, however, she is still bound to nationstate rules. In this case, Rabihah considers the Saudi legislation on the requirement of a *maḥram* rather as an empty legal shell than as a reasonable guideline.

Conclusion

The intersectional analyses of the three cases presented in this chapter illustrate how one seemingly stable condition (female's company by a *maḥram* on pilgrimage) can vary when different intersecting axes of identification interweave with this condition. The general requirement for females to be accompanied by a legal chaperone is subject to manifold further statuses

and situations. As showcased with Haneefah's, Arwa's and Rabihah's stories, besides gender, other enabling or limiting factors are age, citizenship/nationality and the Islamic orientation. For Haneefah, a resident in Saudi Arabia, citizenship was not an issue. Her age was not important either since her family's Islamic understanding (Sunni Muslims following Hanbali *madhhab*) requires a male chaperone regardless of any age. Similarly, Arwa, an Emirati citizen, was not affected by nationstate regulations targeting her national identification, but the identification as Shi'i Muslim was the crucial point for her and her female relative's decision to travel without any male. Age matters as each of these three women took the possibilities based on citizenship to evade regulations grounded in age. For Rabihah, her Malaysian citizenship forced her to produce a *mahram* as she was subject to state regulations which aim at her gender and her age – even though her Islamic understanding as Sunni following Shafi'ite law school does not require it. Thus, considering more than one axis of differentiation in socio-cultural analysis reveals how connections and shifts of some individuals' and/or groups' positionalities vary by the examined axis of identification and affect the positionality as a whole. Shifts in these axes affect people's positionalities as these are mutually constitutive rather than additive. All this is evident in pilgrimage experiences by females in contemporary Saudi Arabia, UAE and Malaysia.

I wish to emphasize that state regulations and Islamic guidelines targeting nationality, gender and age structurally predetermine people's life-worlds. This furthermore means that I do not aim for equating individuals' power with institutional or state power. The three cases are clear examples that elites in positions of power (governments, religious scholars) exercise control over their subjects which typically is of limiting or even discriminating character and which produces inequalities (gender). However, the cases simultaneously offer evidence about how elites can initiate changes with reverse implications (age). But these simultaneously operating discriminating or facilitating structures can be interpreted, accepted, followed, circumvented or resisted as subjects exercise agency individually and collectively. This, in turn, is embedded in their possibilities or limitations based on their social locations and status positions.

Thus, this chapter aimed at providing an insight into how women experience the powerful regulations and positions, comment on it, contest it, strategically use it to their advantage, and attach meaning to it at the crossroads of all the social identifications that inform their sense of identification. By being creative agents, they illuminate everyday life concerns of experience, ambivalence and contingency, and form their female, religious or moral selves. With Haneefah's, Arwa's and Rabiha's stories I have illustrated how individuals navigate their way through different socio-political, cultural and religious conditions.

Notes

- 1 A valuable exception is the contribution by Fewkes in this volume.
- 2 Since 'Black' and 'White' are not interpreted to be skin colours but status position, these are written with capital letters.
- 3 See website of Saudi Arabia Visa: <https://www.saudiarabiavisa.com/hajj-umrah-visa-saudi-arabia/>.
- 4 See website of the UAE Government: <https://government.ae/en/information-and-services/passports-and-traveling/travelling-abroad/travelling-abroad-for-hajj-and-umrah>.
- 5 Federal Constitution Malaysia. n.d. <http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/FC/FEDERAL%20CONSTITUTION%20ULANG%20CETAK%202016.pdf>. Accessed January 21, 2020.
- 6 See website of Saudi Arabia Visa: <https://www.saudiarabiavisa.com/hajj-umrah-visa-saudi-arabia/>.
- 7 This is a pseudonym.

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