Compatibility despite Controversy: Sunni-Shia Marriages within the Singapore Muslim Community

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ABSTRACT

When studying a religion in any society, a basic unit of analysis would be its followers and their ability to harmoniously co-exist and interact with one another. In Islam, intrafaith marriage is an example of this unit. Throughout the Islamic world, most Muslims belong to the Sunni sect, with a significant minority made up of about 15 percent of the population belonging to the Shia sect. However, the relationship between the two sects has been a topic fraught with controversy. Marriages between Sunnis and Shias illustrate the sensitivity of the sectarian divide. Some hardline Sunni Muslim clerics opine that Sunni-Shia marriages are not allowed in Islam as Shi'ism is seen as a deviation from Islam. This article sought to address the question of why and how Sunni-Shia marriages take place despite mistrust between the two communities. It also attempted to capture alternatives to mainstream sociological trends in family formation within the Islamic community where Muslims, as with any other group of people, may choose to marry someone more similar in terms of various social categories such as cultural background and theological belief.

Keywords: Sunni-Shia relations, marriage in Islam, Singapore, religion and marriage

Introduction: Religion and Family Life

In any society, religion provides a locus through which one can study relations among people of divergent worldviews. In fact, an examination of its complex dynamics requires one to go beyond its monolithic understanding. Even within the same religious tradition such as in Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism, religions consist of different denominations, sects, and streams of thought. These differences influence how individuals interact with one another in both public and private settings.

Islam is no different. Most Muslims belong to the dominant Sunni sect, with a significant minority belonging to the Shia[1] sect, who make up about 15 percent of the population. When studying a religion, a key line of inquiry would be the ability of its followers to both coexist and harmoniously interact with one another. Scholars and observers alike view the Sunni-Shia divide as "one of the most salient fault-lines between Muslims today" (Abdullah 2021, 48). However, religion does not inherently divide or bring people together. Sociologically, it is more important to look at how followers of a certain religious tradition understand and practice their faith. This is reflected in the various established social institutions and social relations which include education, government, the judiciary, and family.

The family is an institution where issues of religious practice are particularly salient as it entails intimate relationships between individuals living together. Sociology has traditionally treated marriage and the family as a building block of society. Today, there is no one fixed model for family formation. Globally, practices continue to evolve, especially within Muslim communities. Even the meaning of family itself is continuously being contested. Usually, families are created through marriage where individuals marry within or outside their own social group. As the most intimate domain of social life, marriage is a useful dimension through which relations between two individuals from divergent races, classes, or religious backgrounds can be studied. These differences may also serve as breeding ground for inequalities within families as both individuals may struggle for acceptance from their spouse's family and community.

In the realm of religion, individuals may marry someone who practices the same faith, or someone who espouses a different theological belief system. Yet, individuals may also have different worldviews even if they adhere to the same religious tradition. For example, intrafaith (differing practices within a particular faith) marriages can reveal whether followers of the same religion can coexist peacefully. In Islam, marriages between Sunnis and Shias may illustrate the sensitivities of the sectarian divide. Though not limited to Islam, intrafaith relations has been a topic fraught with controversy. In Malaysia, Sunni discriminatory attitudes towards Shias are prevalent (Musa and Tan 2017, 310). In 1996, the Fatwa Committee for Religious Affairs even branded Shia Islam as "deviant" (317) as it was deemed to be contradictory to the teachings of *Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamma'h* (ASWJ; literal translation: "people of the Sunnah and the community") (314).[2] This meant that Shia beliefs should not be spread and distributed, neither online nor in-print. Nevertheless, ASWJ is a term that carries various definitions, depending on the Muslim context.

The Malaysian case vividly illustrates potential complications arising from Sunnis and Shias coming together in marriage. In the same country, some Muslim leaders have also called to prohibit Sunni-Shia marital unions. The *Sabah Fatwa* Committee passed a decision in 2016 deeming Sunni-Shia marriages as unlawful requiring the revocation of such existing marriages (JHEAINS 2016). Former Perlis *Mufti*[3] Datuk Dr Juanda Jaya also advised against Sunnis marrying Shias arguing that doing so would "avoid conflict in a marriage should the couple want to get a divorce" (Malay Mail Online 2013). Raids against Shia Muslims in Malaysia during the Islamic month of *Muharram* are also not unheard of. Shias were detained and questioned on their beliefs while Shia religious materials were confiscated.

Yet, the intensity of the Sunni-Shia divide differs from one Muslim community to another. Fortunately, in Singapore, sentiments advocating for physical violence against Shias are not as prevalent as in countries like Malaysia. At the official level, the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura*, or the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) recognizes Shi'ism as a sect within

Islam. In 1988, MUIS issued a nonbinding opinion (*fatwa*) stating that "Shias are unequivocally within the fold Islam" (Ahmad and Ali 2018, 284). Nevertheless, despite the absence of physical sectarian violence, studies have shown that prejudices against Shia Muslims do exist in Singapore (Johari 2016; Khalid 2017).

This article seeks to contribute to the sociological literature on evolving family practices in Asia by examining how Sunni-Shia couples navigate through perceptions about sectarian differences in their marital relations and parenting. Three factors and considerations that relate to the everyday lives of Sunni-Shia couples with regard to marital life and parenting will be discussed and elaborated. First, this article will look into and explain the values and traits that help Sunni-Shia couples facilitate their marriage. It will discuss how these values operate amid differences in jurisprudential beliefs. Second, it will explore how Sunni-Shia couples approach parenting, especially in teaching their children about both religious sects. Third, this article will show how differences in beliefs affect intrafaith marriages.

Marriage in Singapore: Transcending Race and Religion

Singapore is an ethnically diverse country. For this reason, one cannot talk about marital trends in the country without taking this into consideration. Hence, it is instructive to situate Singaporean Sunni-Shia marriages within this diversity and the broader marital trends in the context of intercultural marriages. According to the Singapore national statistics, in 2020, this comprised 18.2 percent of all marriages (Hirschmann 2021). This figure has been generally stable in the previous decade (18.4 percent in 2010). Among Muslims, interethnic marriages stood at 22.1 percent in 2020, slightly higher than the national total (Department of Statistics Singapore 2021). Of the total (1,396), Indian men and Malay women marriages accounted for 24.7 percent while those between Malay men and Indian women, 19.8 percent. Moreover, marriages between Malays and Chinese, or Malays and "Others"[4] occurred less frequently.

In countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, dissociating race and ethnicity from religion is difficult. Thus, interracial marriages tend to be a proxy for interreligious marriages. Compared to monocultural couples, individuals within interracial couples are more likely to adhere to different religious beliefs (Skowroński et al. 2014, 280). What makes Sunni-Shia marriages unique is that these are unions between individuals of the same religion but not necessarily of the same race. Most Malay Muslims in Singapore today are Sunni. However, the number of Shia Malays is increasing, therefore, it is not surprising to come across Sunni-Shia couples who are both Malay. Nonetheless, in this research, couples of different ethnicities were also interviewed.

Muslim Intrafaith Marriage in Singapore

While maintaining religious harmony is a key concern for any society, the reality is that internal fissures also exist within the Muslim community itself. Though belonging to the same religion, Muslims differ in their philosophy, interpretation, and school of thought. The division into Sunnis and Shias (though other smaller sects also exist) illustrates these differences. While MUIS regards Shias as Muslims, they either do not (overtly) defend Shias and Shi'ism or remain ambiguous when prejudicial views against Shias spread on the internet (Halim 2017; Norshahril et al. 2021, 8).

The presence of Shias in Singapore can be traced back to the early part of the 20th century. Shias came from British India and were mainly Persians and ethnic Indians from the Ismaili Dawoodi Bohra (a religious domination among Shia Ismailis) and Twelver branch of Shi'ism.[5] After observing the Iranian revolution of 1979, a small group of Malay Sunnis began to embrace Twelver Shi'ism (Ahmad and Ali 2018, 284). Since then, Shias in Singapore adopted Malay, the language of most Sunnis who are themselves Malay. Twelver Shias are currently represented through organizations such as the Jaafari Muslim Association Singapore and Himpunan Belia Islam (Muslim Youth Assembly).

Differences between followers of the same religion may manifest positively or negatively, possibly leading to the formation of prejudices and stereotypes against one another. In more extreme expressions, these perceptions may lead to (attempted) violence and even death. For instance, in May 2017, "two auxiliary police officers in Singapore" were arrested for "terrorism-related offenses." One of them, a Sunni Muslim, reportedly viewed the war in Syria as a dichotomy between Sunnis and Shias. He wanted to "join the Free Syrian Army" to "fight" the Shias in Syria (Alatas 2017). This "us-versus-them" mentality stands in stark contrast to the fact that prominent Singapore Shias have "contributed much to the overall development of the Singapore Muslim community" (Alatas 2017). This can be illustrated by the establishment of the MUIS in 1968. It was founded through the cooperation of both Sunnis and Shias with the legal advisor, Mr. Mohamed Javad Namazie, a prominent Shia lawyer (Alatas 2017).

Marriage is an important unit of analysis when studying intrafaith relations, because it is a site where religious followers of different sects directly interact with one another. In the case of Islam, such an analysis can provide one with an idea of how Sunnis and Shias perceive one another and how they negotiate these differences. However, one may be hard-pressed to find academic literature on this type of marriage. A notable exception is Bromberger's (2014) study on the Tâlesh, an ethnic group of northwestern Iran. He studied how children of Sunni-Shia couples adopted the religious affiliation of their parents, revealing that boys adopt their father's religious affiliation while girls took their mother's. However, there were exceptions. For example, children may adopt the religious affiliation of the more dominant parent in their lives. The parents themselves might choose to raise their child Shia in their local community, since their community is predominantly Shia.

Works that talk about the history and current realities of Sunni-Shia divisions are more common to find (Louër 2020; Wehrey 2017; Betts 2013; Haddad 2020). While these works are important in explaining the various historical factors regarding the Sunni-Shia division, reconciliation between

the two groups are less emphasized. Rather than focusing on marital unions, most materials revolve around the views that Sunni and Shia Muslims have towards temporary marriage, or views on marriage within the two religious traditions (Badran and Turbull 2019; Hosseini 2021).

In Singapore, little, if at all, has been written on the phenomenon of Sunni-Shia marriages. Two plausible reasons account for this. The first reason is demographic. Because the Muslim population in Singapore is predominantly Sunni, this type of marriage, while they do happen, occur in small numbers. The second reason is the existence of stereotypes against Shias in Singapore. One such stereotype comes from a Facebook group *Melayu Singapura Tolak Syiah* (Singaporean Malays Reject Shi'ism). This group remarked that Shias sought to dismiss all the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and warned against the "infiltration" of Shi'ism in the country (Johari 2016, 72). Other stereotypes include Shi'ism being viewed as a belief system that is strange, alien, and out of the fold of Islam. In this context, it would be difficult to be openly Shia. The same can be said with announcing that one is in an intrafaith marriage. It would go against an exclusivist Sunni paradigm that an individual must only marry a fellow Sunni, making data gathering on Sunni-Shia marriages difficult.

Methodology

In this paper, intrafaith marriages will be used as the unit of analysis to explain how Sunni-Shia couples in Singapore negotiate an environment where inadequate knowledge, ignorance, and misinformation of Shi'ism still exists. Some Sunnis are misinformed that Shias are not Muslim, or at least not fully Islamic. Hence, a marriage between a Sunni and a Shia would be seen by those Sunnis as controversial. This paper argues that Sunni-Shia couples share similar values and traits that facilitate a harmonious marriage despite differences in jurisprudential beliefs. Second, Sunni-Shia couples raise their children such that they instill in them a sense of appreciation for both sects. Lastly, differences in beliefs are not hindrances to lasting marriages as long as both parties are, and choose to be, educated about each other's beliefs.

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, finding respondents to talk about their intrafaith marriages was not easy. Nevertheless, a few couples were found through snowball sampling. A member of the Muslim community involved in intrafaith work suggested some couples through his own network. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, with probing questions asked when deemed necessary and relevant. Consent for the study and for the recording of the interviews was obtained beforehand. The couples were also informed that data from the interviews would be published—this allowed the interlocutors to assess how much they wanted to share. Each interview lasted for about one and a half to two hours.

A total of four interviews were conducted for the study, three of whom were couples and an individual, a Shia male (his wife did not feel comfortable to be interviewed) (See Table 1). Two of the couples consisted of a Shia husband and a Sunni wife, while the other two couples consisted of a Sunni husband and a Shia wife. In two of the couples, both spouses were Malay while the other two couples were mixed. Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in the couples' home or workplace. The fourth one was done over Skype. All the interlocutors in this study have been anonymized using pseudonyms.

Table 1: Description of Interlocutors

Couple Respondents	Sex	Islamic Sect	Nationality
Fatimah	Female	Sunni	Malay
Hussein	Male	Shia	Malay
Maryam	Female	Shia	Malay
Hisham	Male	Sunni	Malay
Zainab	Female	Shia	Malay
Azman	Male	Sunni	Non-Malay
Zulaikha	Female	Sunni	Malay
Mirza	Male	Shia	Non-Malay

Making Intrafaith Marriages Work: Values and Traits

Because Sunnis constitute the majority of the Muslim population in Singapore, the level of interaction between them and the Shias is unequal. The presence of Sunnis is not new to the Shias, whose beliefs by contrast are "new" to Sunnis.

Acknowledging Differences

The respondents acknowledged that there were some differences between Sunnism and Shi'ism, especially to the question of who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim community. Nonetheless, the degree of importance both parties chose to attach to these differences were more significant to the relationship. Differences in religious beliefs—in this case within the same religion—need not necessarily translate to differences in values. One couple I interviewed, Hussein (Shia) and Fatimah (Sunni) emphasized a strong value foundation in a marriage that some may see as controversial. They are both Malay, and have undergraduate degrees from the same university. Hussein is in his mid-thirties and Fatimah is in her early thirties. They also have two children. Hussein acknowledged that intrafaith marriages would be difficult but did not think that it should be avoided.

> You must first be very frank with each other. Where do you want to bring the family towards to? Definitely, there will be opposition—either from family or friends. But I would say that through these marriages, you build trust. I think now, I'm closer to her parents—very open. Even my friends who are going through intrafaith marriage. Maybe at the start, their family oppose[s] it but now they're close [with] their in-laws. I don't think intrafaith marriage is impossible. It's just a stereotype you have before marriage. Even now, between me and the uncles and all that, they don't talk about it anymore. So the stereotype is there, but when they actually know the people and understand each other's side, they['d] just say, 'eh these people are nothing. They're just our fellow Muslims.' So my advice is always get to know the person first.[6]

Fatimah and Hussein acknowledged that jurisprudential differences between Sunnis and Shias could be an issue if they wished to marry since they had different interpretations of their religion. Aside from that, the couple's families may not be comfortable with relating to other families who do not interpret Islam the same way. However, they also believed that belonging to different sects could also unite a community or a couple. Hussein uttered a simple yet powerful statement: "Islam is for all the *mazhabs* (schools of thought)."[7]

Another factor that helped the couple deal with intrafaith differences were their partners' particular traits pertaining to the receptivity towards other beliefs and the way they presented themselves to society. These traits made it less difficult to accept someone who was not of the same Muslim sect. For instance, Hussein appreciated that Fatimah was open-minded in the sense that she was open to accepting Shi'ism and that she "knew her limits."

> I did make it clear to her that if you cannot accept Shi'ism, then to me, there's no point going on because ... as a family unit, you have to be able to go in one direction and that is the direction of what Rasulullah [Prophet of Allah, i.e., Muhammad] wants ... what Islam wants. For me, it's easy because at the end of the day, Sunni cannot deny the importance of *Ahl al-Bayt*.[8] For me, that was very clear, and that should be the foundation of that marriage. So that's where I made my decision. She does not believe in Shi'ism just because she wants to get married. Her belief should be fundamentally because of her love for Allah and Rasulullah and the Imams.

In terms of how individuals present themselves publicly, Hussein commented about how he appreciated Fatimah for how she composed herself to the community. He explained that he would not have been comfortable if his wife took a lot of pictures of herself and uploaded them on social media. He also would not like it if his wife wore makeup because to him, that signified that she was not comfortable with her own natural beauty.

> We are in the world of social media, where the girls will just keep posting pictures of themselves showing off, and et cetera. If she did that, definitely I will not marry her ... because I cannot take my wife always being in the social media. And then ... this might be a bit ... how to say ... maybe some people cannot accept it ... but one of the criteria for me is that she does not wear makeup. To me, if someone always wear makeup, there's no self-esteem. It means they don't believe in their natural beauty. They need things to show that they are pretty. When I choose my wife, I foresee what kind of kids I will have. That will provide a basis for what we want for the family. Because at the end of the day, the mother has a lot more influence as compared to the father.

Having a partner who was both open-minded and reserved was important for Hussein. These traits were significant deciding factors for marrying Fatimah. Marrying someone of the same sect was not as important.

Partnership amidst varying levels of religiosity

Mirza is an Indian Shia. His wife, Zulaikha, who declined to be interviewed, is a Malay Sunni. Both are 55 years old and have been married for 26 years. They have two sons, aged 17 and 19. He comes from the upper middle-class while his wife is middle-class. He described his wife as "liberal" and "not very religious." Although this is the case, Mirza appreciated that she was inquisitive and curious about Shi'ism. Her curiosity made it easier for his parents to accept her as their daughter-in-law.

> My wife is not a very religious person. She does not follow the doctrines strictly, so she readily accepted our Shia way of prayers. Even though my father was a devout Shia, when my wife asked some questions as to why we pray like this, why we do this and that, my father used to reply in a very neutral way. And then he asked her to decide for herself what she thought was correct. So,

> in a way, we did not really "force" her to accept the Shia ritual. As she was also liberal, and she respected my late mother very much. She followed basically all the Shia rituals, even the clothes that we wear to go to the mosque and the clothes that we wear to pray.

Irrespective of their sect, a partner must have certain traits that increased the chances of an intrafaith marriage to work. These did not make Sunni-Shia jurisprudential differences disappear; it just made it easier to navigate through these differences. In Mirza's case, Zulaikha's open-mindedness and curiosity made it easier for both of them during courtship, since it engendered a level of respect from Zulaikha towards her husband's family. Her inactiveness in practicing religiosity was not seen by Mirza as an obstacle to their marriage nor was it seen as an advantage. He described her religiosity in a matter-of-fact manner and not as a positive nor a negative trait.

Likewise, Maryam, 43, also a Shia, saw traits in her husband Hisham, 46, a Sunni, that she admired. Maryam and Hisham have been married for 18 years and have two daughters. Maryam has a postgraduate diploma and Hisham a diploma. Maryam valued a husband who was sincere in his faith.

> I'm a very outdoor person so my future hubby was screened during camping trips to ensure he doesn't snore while sleeping and doesn't smell bad. And if he can lead the Subuh[9] prayers which include the *Qunut*[10] recitation which usually people skip and Subuh is also the prayers which people often missed ... So my hubby lead the Subuh prayer daily during camp and he recited the full long version of the *Qunut* and when he ended the prayers, he even led the *Dua*[11] session. That was my main criteria for a husband. If he knows the things which people often missed, [it] means he is strong in his religion. And when he prays, his accent is normal because there was another guy whose accent changed when he prayed, and I ended up laughing.

Another couple interviewed were Azman and Zainab, the former a Sunni and the latter, his wife, a Shia. Unlike the other couples, they met online. They were not too concerned about the fact that they were each dating someone belonging to a different sect. Before marrying Azman, Zainab had dated mostly Sunnis, because they constituted the majority of the Muslim population in the country. However, she described those dating experiences as unhealthy, mostly due to the ignorance on the part of Sunnis toward Shias. She explains that she sought Shia men, even if it was difficult to meet Shia men in Singapore. According to Zainab, she came to a point in her life where she realized that while it was important to be cognizant of Sunni-Shia differences, a man that shared with her certain values was more important.

> I realized that this whole Sunni-Shia thing ... it is important, but what's more important to me right now is the basic fundamental religious views; ethics are important; the philosophy; how do you orientate yourself; what your orientation is towards Islam.

Azman, while not downplaying Sunni-Shia differences, placed more importance on the nature of the couples dating. The person's character mattered more than their jurisprudential beliefs.

> It depends on the couple. There's so much diversity even within Shi'ism as well. You have to see what kind of a Shia are you; or what kind of a Sunni are you. It's all about the person and their religious identity.

The couples in this study appreciated one another's values and traits. However, the experiences of courtship versus parenting in relation to Sunni-Shia differences inevitably differ because couples had to decide on how they would want to raise their children. These decisions are explored in the next section.

Making Intrafaith Marriages Work: How to Raise the Children?

Children of Sunni-Shia couples have been humorously referred to as "Sushi" (Al-Jadir 2016), a combination of the words "Sunni" and "Shia." Inevitably, a Sunni-Shia marriage brought to the fore the question of how parents would inculcate religious practices in their children. Would their child be raised according to Sunni tradition, Shia tradition, or both? In the discussions with my interlocutors, the topic of children was not a divisive issue as initially thought.

How should the children pray?

The case of Hisham and Maryam was illustrative of how couples felt confident in raising children despite differing jurisprudential beliefs. While both of them hoped that their children would adhere to their respective beliefs, Maryam (wife) was more concerned about raising her daughters as Muslims rather than as Sunnis or Shias. She was particularly concerned about the influence of social media on her daughters at an impressionable age. She believed that the ideal world was a "Muslim" world, not a "Sunni-Shia" world.

> When we're bringing up the kids, we're just more concerned with making them more Muslim rather than Shia or Sunni. Like my girls, when we're bringing them up, the law of dress code is still the same so we're just making them more religious. Bringing them up to become a proper Muslim is a more challenging task. They go to secular schools. They mix with other different races. They have different ideas of what it means to be a teenager because of the media ... that's the more challenging thing that I need to focus on. I just want the world to be a Muslim world, not a Sunni-Shia world.

However, Maryam had to confront the reality of raising "Sushi" children when a teacher in her daughters' religious class raised a concern. When they were younger, the two girls, now aged 12 and 15, were asked

about the way they prayed, displaying curiosity over the differences in the way Sunnis and Shias prayed. Accordingly, Maryam shared an anecdote during the time she was struggling to practice her Shia beliefs.

> Both girls are taught the Shia and Sunni way so they do both. We teach them about Islam and not specifically differentiating it to Sunni and Shia. There was this time where I struggled. My girls, most of the time they're with me, right, so when I was praying, they were praying the Shia way ... so when they went to childcare center, the teacher sees them praying differently. So, the teacher questioned us and I said that I'm Shia so we pray that way. She (the teacher) said it's the wrong way. My girl questioned me and said if we are the correct one, what is there to hide? My elder one is just more of questioning certain things now. I'm just providing her with information and when the time comes, she can choose. I think she's more upset with the *matam* (symbolic beating of one's own chest).[12] It's the same thing as how I feel. They (Shias) cry that things weren't provided for at Karbala (city in Iraq)[13] but at the end of the *majlis* (ceremony) we're served with all kinds of food. There are certain things where my girls were questioning and saying that the Shias in Singapore are being so-called pretentious. She says we can cry, but at the end of the majlis, we shouldn't celebrate. There shouldn't be a feast.

After being questioned by the childcare teacher, Maryam asked her friends who were also in an intrafaith marriage how they taught their kids to pray. One of her friends advised to teach her daughters both ways of praying. From then on, Maryam and Hisham taught their daughters how to pray in both the Sunni and Shia way, depending on where they were. This allowed the girls to decide for themselves which sect to follow once they reached a certain age, although both parents admitted that they hoped their daughters would eventually follow their own traditions. Maryam and Hisham did not impose their individual belief systems on their children. They were more concerned about making sure their children were aware of both the Sunni

and Shia tradition. The questions posed by their daughter's childcare teacher provided a glimpse into one of the difficulties of being in a Sunni-Shia marital union and raising children the "right" way—the Sunni way.

Children and Breaking Stereotypes

Like Maryam's daughters, Mirza's sons were curious about the Sunni-Shia discord[14] and the existing stereotypes against Shias. One of his sons wondered if there should be a reason for the conflict to exist even at present: "So what, just because I believe this to have happened 1400 years ago, does that make me a Shia? I mean it already happened." The son questioned the relevance of the label "Shia" because to him, the dispute originated from 1400 years ago. Interestingly, he was questioning out of curiosity rather than an unwillingness to be labeled as Shia. Mirza could not give him an adequate response and told him maybe he would find the answer. His son continued, "If Imam Ali didn't say that he should be first caliph, why are we disputing that?" These kinds of questions were an outcome of how Mirza and Zulaikha raised their children. While Mirza did mention he would like to think his children are Shia, he did not harp on this hope. He did not want his sons to grow up thinking that Sunnis and Shias had irreconcilable differences. Their parenting strategy was situated within a context of misunderstanding and prejudice about Shias and they did not want their children to become part of it.

> To me and my wife, it makes no difference. There are some Sunnis and Shias who are very particular. They will say it's wrong or it's a cardinal sin to pray differently. I know. I have seen people preach like that. As far as teaching our children, we taught them the basics, reading the Quran, performing *salat* (prayer). To me, the only difference between Sunni and Shia is the person who succeeded Nabi Rasulullah. I do not want our children to feel that there is a great divide between Sunnis and Shias.

While my interlocutors were concerned with informing their children about Sunni and Shia traditions, they did not want them to favor one over the other. They were more focused on preventing them from developing prejudices against Sunnis or Shias. This was crucial in an age where misinformation could easily be spread on the internet as a result of a lack of education about Shi'ism. The couples I interviewed felt that Singapore lacked awareness about the Muslim community and the basic tenets of Shia Islam. Instead of sectarian differences being hindrances, Sunni-Shia marriages could instead serve as a platform for couples to familiarize themselves with each other's beliefs. Furthermore, the respondent couples referred to their marriage as illustrative examples of why it is important to know the different strands of Islam in diverse religious communities such as Singapore.

Similarly, Fatimah and Hussein were also acutely aware about the prospects of raising "Sushi" children. They knew that their children would be stereotyped, especially due to having a Shia parent. On the one hand, the couples sympathized with other Shias who had the tendency to hide their identities due to the existence of these prejudices. On the other, they were adamant that the Muslim community needed to learn about Shias. This process began with raising their children aware of both Sunni and Shia traditions.

> They (the kids) should be proud of what they believe. They should share what they believe. By doing that, then people will understand. Definitely, there will be people who stereotype. They should be the agents of unity. Among the Shias, we understand why we hide because they're scared of the repercussions. But how will people know about Shias if we keep hiding? If we raise them right when they're young, then it shouldn't be a cause of concern. Not worry but knowing that I have this concern then I think we should start to nurture them well from [a] young [age].

The couples were aware of the challenges of raising "Sushi" children. Nevertheless, they sought to prepare their children to interact with Muslims of differing views as they approached adulthood. Generally, raising their

children as Sunni or Shia was a secondary concern. First and foremost, they wanted their children to be good Muslims, regardless of how they prayed or how they felt about the question of Islamic successorship.

Making Intrafaith Marriages Work: Managing Lack of Education on Shi'ism

From the respondents' point of view, the negative perception towards Sunni-Shia couples reflected a lack of education on the diversity of Islamic tradition. One respondent, Fatimah, shared how even the food of the Shias was questioned. Moreover, she had a very difficult time getting her family's approval to marry Hussein. Things only began to change when Hussein had a heart-to-heart talk with her mother during a trip. In this conversation, Hussein not only assured his prospective mother-in-law of his serious intentions to marry, but also explained that Shias were also Muslims adhering to the same pillars of faith as Sunni Muslims. He also argued that marriage was the right path for them, better than eloping, if he could not get his mother-in-law's blessing. Eventually, she gave Hussein and Fatimah her blessing.

> I approached her parents within a few months of knowing her because I did not want to waste time. One day, when we were going to Johor and [her] (mother-in-law) wanted to follow, [I thought] that was the best opportunity to talk to her. I talked to her nicely. I asked her, "What do you want me to do? Do you want me to elope [with your daughter]? That will not be good for you. It will not be good for us. The kids will not be close to you. My wife will also be estranged from you. Is that what you want?" Sometimes you want to talk sense to people ... although you don't want to do it, but you must tell them, "Why are you doing this ... this will cause us to choose a different path instead of the proper path." So, *alhamdulillah*, after that conversation then she realized ... then she allow[ed] us to get married.

After the marriage ceremony, Fatimah's parents showed some uneasiness over Hussein's beliefs, although this decreased over time. According to Fatimah, her mother (seemingly influenced by her aunt) claimed that the food Shias prepare was not *halal* (food permissible for consumption according to Islamic rulings). When asked what the overall narrative was about Sunni-Shia marriages and intrafaith dialogue at the time of their marriage, she replied, "I felt that it was more of a crime marrying a Shia than a Chinese convert. If it's not just as bad, it could be worse."

In their view, this ignorance stemmed from a dearth of interaction between Sunnis and Shias. Whereas, informally, marriage could constitute a form of education for Sunni members of a family unfamiliar with Shi'ism; while at the formal level, Shi'ism should be taught more comprehensively at religious classes. Fatimah recounted how the presentation of Shi'ism in educational settings was notably superficial. For instance, in some classes, the teachers would just portray Shias doing the *matam*. Education must go beyond the popular representation of Shias toward guiding other Muslims to better familiarize themselves with their beliefs, jurisprudence, and practices.

As mentioned previously, most Sunni Muslims in Singapore are Malay. While the number of Shia Malays is growing, the non-Malay Shia population still exists. However, based on the finding of this study, race was not a factor in influencing the outcome of a Sunni-Shia relationship. Hussein and Mirza, for example, felt that the controversy surrounding this could be attributed to ignorance about Shi'ism and the ensuing stereotypes leveled against Shia Muslims had nothing to do with Shias being "otherized" as non-Malays. Furthermore, as Hussein mentioned, "most of the Sunni-Shia marriage are between people of the same race. So, you will rarely see marriages between different races. There are … but it is not common."

Maryam and Hisham's story re-emphasized that race was not an issue, but rather a lack of knowledge about Muslims who do not belong to the majority sect. She did not think there were prejudices against Shias in Singapore, although she did acknowledge that Sunnis might have a bad impression of Shias when they hear or read stories on social media.

Even then, more educated Muslims must explain and clarify what was true about Shi'ism and what was not. During the conversation, Hisham even mentioned that, in the Asia-Pacific, there were no books on Shi'ism, all the more demonstrating the dearth of education on Shi'ism in the region.

> We had issues before and during the early stage of our marriage with regard to religion with the elders, but between husband and wife, no issues. My hubby's side (Sunni) had more reservation as I find that the upbringing they had was never to question and just follow. My mom-in-law was adamant that Shia are not considered a Muslim and she had a relative who is an *Ustaz*[15] working in MUIS who thinks the same way. My hubby's paternal grandparents were the ones who asked for my hand in marriage as they are the ones who knock some sense to my parents-in-law.

Because of Hisham's grandparents, his parents felt comfortable giving their blessings to the marriage. According to Maryam, his grandparents' reasoned: "She (Maryam) is still a Muslim, and you only have one son (Hisham). His happiness matters."

Hisham concurred with Maryam's assessment of their courtship process that the difficulty reflected the state of awareness on Shi'ism in Singapore. He was not religious when he met Maryam. At that time, not being religious also meant that he could not appreciate why Sunnis distinguished themselves from Shias, though he was aware of Sunni ignorance towards Shias.

> Sunnis, in general, take Shias as the wrong way. Shia itself is broken into several different *mazhabs*. They (Sunnis) are shut off from Shias so they don't really know what Shia is all about. You can't find books on Shi'ism in [the] Asia-Pacific much. For Sunnis, they break it down into four *mazhabs*. Sunnis don't really label people as non-Muslim as long as it doesn't go against the pillars. The Shias have the main pillars.

Hisham noted that despite the ignorance, Sunnis did not necessarily label Shias as non-Muslim. However, even Hisham's parents took a while in accepting Maryam herself. At one point, just as they were about to be married, they broke off the engagement because Hisham's mother did not agree with Maryam's beliefs. He had to explain to his mother that Shias, like Sunnis, observed the five pillars of Islam emphasizing that as Sunnis, they had no right to say someone who professed the Islamic faith was not a Muslim.

> I convinced my parents. They accept that Shias are Muslims. As long as the five pillars are there. For Sunnis, we have no right to say you are non-Muslim. As long as the additional Shia beliefs don't go against the *Syariah*, it is acceptable.

As for Azman and Zainab, they already knew that misinformation about the Shia community was widespread. Nevertheless, Azman was keen on understanding how Zainab practiced Shi'ism and felt confident about his relationship with her. He was genuine in wanting to learn about her beliefs. They did not face stern opposition to their union, although Azman's relatives were frank about their preferences for a spouse. He respected their opinion, just as they respected Zainab.

> When my siblings learned more about Zainab ... once they understood how we were trying to make it work, then they were okay with that. The same would go with my friends. They wondered what the differences were, if it would be conducive to a functioning household. I was clear on how we can work things out, and I would communicate that with my circle of friends and family in particular. My parents aren't really concerned with the Sunni-Shia issue. For my siblings and close friends, they themselves have their preferences for what they want in their partner, but they also understand that these are my values. They're fine with that. They just wanted me to make sure that I've thought about it.

Zainab was very much aware of the Sunnis in Singapore as she grew up around them her whole life. Before meeting Azman, she also dated some and knew early on that dating one, in an environment where there was a lack of awareness and ignorance of Shi'ism, was going to be difficult. She even went through a phase in her life where she "just wanted to meet Shia men." However, while she did realize Sunnis and Shias were different, what was more important to her was an individual's religious views, ethics, philosophy, and orientation towards Islam. One of her formative impressions of Sunnis was that they did not know much about Shias or Shi'ism.

> I went to a Sunni Madrasah, in primary school, in secondary school ... obviously my Malay Muslim friends are Sunnis, right? For me, my impression of Sunni ... in my early twenties, I found that Sunnis were generally quite ignorant about ... I mean in Singapore. They're quite ignorant about sectarianism. They don't know that there are Shias, or that within the Sunni school there are different *mazhabs*.

The ignorance Zainab discussed stemmed from the fact that being a Malay and being a Sunni Shafi'i in the Malay world was arbitrarily linked. Never mind the ignorance about Shias; some Sunnis do not realize that non-Shafi'i schools of jurisprudence within Sunni Islam also existed. She also lamented the Sunnis' perception that converting to Shi'ism was wrong. This was rooted in a lack of awareness of the history of Islam in Southeast Asia. In fact, historically, during the earlier years of Islam, Iranian and South Asian Shias resided in Southeast Asia. Shias were also said to be present among the Malay community in modern Southeast Asia.

Describing himself as "not staunch in my *mazhab*," Mirza, nonetheless, was acutely aware of the challenges a Sunni-Shia couple may face in Singapore. However, he did question Sunnis who insisted on pitting other Sunnis against Shias.

> When [you] play soccer, you have a mix of people and one of them was a Sunni and he found out that I was a Shia. He became upset and later on, I found out that his brother converted to

> Shi'ism. One day I confronted him and asked, "can you explain to me how your brother converted to Shi'ism? Was there a ritual that he had to go through, something that he had to perform, recite ... ?" He couldn't answer. To make matters worse, he said when a Sunni goes into a Shia Mosque, and when he leaves, the Shias will wash the mosque and have to purify it (like an ablution of the mosque). And I'm like, "Where did you hear this? Which book?" Then he said when the Shias bury, they bury [their] feet in first. These kind[s] of things. So, he got upset because he thought this guy has deviated from the true path of Islam. But actually, it's nothing. We bury the same way as any Muslim were to bury. Any Shia, Sunni can come into a Shia, Sunni Mosque.

In Mirza's mind, unnecessary comparisons between Sunnis and Shias were a precursor to hate that was not grounded on facts. When he asked his Sunni and Shia friends what set them apart, nobody could give him an answer. In the context of a marriage, he acknowledged that questions would be asked about the other sect. For instance, his wife's father had "some concerns about Shi'ism." His paramount worry was whether Shias were considered a legitimate sect among Muslims as he was afraid his daughter would be marrying someone from a sect that the broader Muslim community does not accept. Mirza then proceeded to provide a detailed account of the marriage contract ceremony (*nikah*). His father-in-law wanted his own Muslim judge (*qadi*) from the MUIS to officiate the ceremony. Mirza's family's *qadi* did not recognize the father-in-law's as they were Dawoodi Bohras, a sect within the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam that did not abide by the MUIS *fatwa*. In the end, both *qadis* were present at the *nikah*. Because of the conflict, both *qadis* performed the *nikah*, which Mirza did not anticipate. At some point, Mirza's father-in-law checked with the MUIS to find out more about Shi'ism. When MUIS told him that Shias were a legitimate sect in Islam, his stance towards them softened and he became more mellow.

Mirza acknowledged that there was discord between Sunnis and Shias in Singapore. During a very candid moment, he mentioned that "Shias have always been very reclusive. They tend to socialize only among themselves, hence people became a little bit suspicious of them." Nonetheless, this did not justify prejudice. Mirza averred that "Prejudice is learnt. It is not inborn." He further mentioned that the sectarian differences should matter little in the context of a marriage. If a Sunni was going to marry a Shia, they should understand what makes them different in the first place. Mirza noted that they would not find differences, nor irreconcilable differences. He felt that if prejudice was learned, it could be unlearned. This required educating oneself on the Sunni and Shia traditions.

Conclusion

In terms of race, ethnicity, cultural practice, and jurisprudential beliefs, Muslims in Singapore are diverse. Embedded in this diversity are relationships between various groups of people. Marriage is a useful analytical point of departure from which one can examine relations between people of varying schools of thought. This article focused on marital relations between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Singapore. Sunni-Shia marriage in Singapore is an understudied topic that can provide deeper analysis on how Sunnis and Shias view one another. This study has shown that, notwithstanding differences in belief, such a marriage need not invite the level of controversy that it does today. One of the key solutions to normalizing Sunni-Shia marriages and relationships is education. An awareness of the different Sunni *mazhabs*, in addition to Shi'ism, can ideally decrease the inclination to view intrafaith marriages within the Muslim community as anathema to the Islamic faith.

One limitation of this article is that the types of couples interviewed may not be too comfortable or vocal about their marriage in public due to the presence, even if latent, of anti-Shia sentiment in Singapore. Nevertheless, this article hopes to lead to the development of work and scholarship on Sunni-Shia marriages. Their presence represents alternatives

to mainstream sociological trends in family formation within the Muslim community where Muslims, as with any other group of people, may choose to marry someone more similar in terms of various social categories such as cultural background and theological belief.

About the Author

Syed Imad Alatas is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. His research interests include the sociology of religion and gender, topics he enjoys writing on in academic and non-academic settings. His master's thesis at the National University of Singapore, which was recently published as a book, focused on female Muslim NGOs in Malaysia and their discourses on marital issues and gender relations. Prior to commencing his master's studies, he worked at the Middle East Institute at NUS, where he oversaw the institute's publications and was in-charge of the internship program. He has written for journals such as *Kajian Malaysia*, *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, and the *Southeast Asian Social Science Review*. Outside academia, he writes for publications such as *Free Malaysia Today*, *Malay Mail*, *The Star*, and *Karyawan* in Singapore.

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Endnotes

[1] Shia or Shi'ism is a branch of Muslims who believe that the Prophet Muhammad designated his son-in-law Ali ibn Abu Talib as his successor. In early Islamic history, the Shias were known as "*Shiat Ali*" or "Party of Ali." Meanwhile, Sunni Muslims believe that Abu Bakr was the rightful successor.

[2] *Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamma'h* (ASWJ) is a term that may carry various definitions depending on the Muslim context. For example, in countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, ASWJ refers to Sunni Muslims who are predominantly Shafi'i in their jurisprudence and adhere to the Ashʿarī school of theology. ASWJ literally translates to "people of the Sunnah and the community." These people adhere to the prophetic tradition and practices (*Sunnah*) and are united in this adherence. However, other scholars argue that such a definition excludes non-Sunni Muslims, such as Shias.

[3] A *mufti* is an Islamic jurist or legal expert qualified to issue a *Fatwa* on a certain ruling within Islamic law. Nine of the 14 Malaysian states have their own *Mufti*, while the Department of Islamic Advancement of Malaysia appoints *Muftis* for the five states which do not have monarchs.

[4] The Singapore Department of Statistics defines "Others" as all ethnic groups who are not Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, and Caucasian.

[5] The Dawoodi Bohras is a religious denomination among Shia Ismailis. They make up the second largest branch of Shia Islam, after the Twelver Shias. While Ismaili Shias believe in seven divinely ordained Imams, Twelver Shias believe in 12 divinely ordained Imams.

[6] All quotes are direct quotes.

[7] *Mazhab* is an Arabic term referring to any school of thought within Islamic jurisprudence.

[8] While Sunnis and Shias disagree on its composition, both agree that *Ahl al-Bayt* refers to the family of the Prophet Muhammad.

[9] *Subuh* refers to the first of five mandatory prayers for Muslims.

[10] *Qunut* is a supplication type of prayer offered at a specific point during prayer while standing.

[11] A *dua* is a prayer of request for Muslims to ask God for assistance or protection from challenges and calamities.

[12] *Matam* is an Arabic term referring to the act of mourning. In Shia Islam, the term denotes acts of mourning and grieving for the martyrs of Karbala, a city in Iraq where the Prophet Muhammad's grandson was brutally murdered by the Umayyad ruler Yazid I.

[13] Karbala is a city in central Iraq. The city carries symbolic significance for Shia Muslims as it is where Imam Hussein was martyred.

[14] The origins of this discord can be traced back to 14 centuries ago when Muslims disagreed over who should succeed the prophet. Though Sunnis and Shias have co-existed peacefully for most of history, the discord has exploded in contemporary times into violent physical conflict as Sunni and Shia extremist groups vie for political supremacy.

[15] *Ustaz* is an honorific title referring to a male Islamic religious teacher. The female equivalent is "ustazah."

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