Muslim Diasporas in a Comparative Perspective: Islam in Europe and South America

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In the second half of the twentieth century, processes of migration and, in lesser extent, conversion allowed the constitution of expressive Muslim communities in Europe and the Americas. There are 5 to 6 million Muslims in the USA, 4 to 5 million in France, 3 million in Germany, 1.6 million in the United Kingdom, 1 million in Spain and 700,000 in the Netherlands. There are also large Muslim communities in Argentina and Brazil, with 1 million Muslims each, as well as in Suriname (20% of the population). These numbers are better seen as estimates, as in most cases there is no reliable census of the Muslim communities and the number of their members

is hotly disputed according to the various political agendas that inform the public debate on Islam. For example, in the USA the Islamic authorities tend to inflate the demographic importance of the Muslim communities, while conservative and pro-Israeli organizations try to minimize their presence in the American society (Cesari, 2004, p. 22-3; Kepel, 1997, p. 44-78).

More than a simple demographic fact, the Muslim communities in the "West" became invested with symbolic and political meanings by the ongoing debate about the supposed incompatibility between "Islam" and "Western" values, such as democracy, gender equality and individual rights. This ideological debate, which gained force in the USA and in Europe after September 11 and the terrorist attacks in London and Madrid, found its rationale in the identification of signs of cultural malaise and radical militancy among European Muslims. Beyond the universe right-wing xenophobic politicians and their correlates in academia there is a widespread perception in Europe and the US that the Muslim presence constitutes a "fifth column" that threatens the democratic and liberal character of Western societies. The Muslim response, which is echoed by many scholars,[1] has an apologetic tone that sees in the Muslim commu-

1 Even Asef Bayat (2007), who is very critical of essentialist approaches to Islam, seems to accept "democracy" as a useful category for the analysis of the recent transformations in the Muslim religiosity.

nities the breeding ground for a "reformed Islam" that would embrace democracy and pluralism as part of its religious ethos.

Some scholars, while rejecting an essentialized portrait of Muslims, suggested that in the European context Islam became a de-territorialized system of meaning that exists beyond cultural particularities (Roy, 2004). However a closer look shows that the Muslim identities in Europe and the Americas are the result of a complex articulation between local sociological and cultural elements and the various constructs of the normative system of Islamic doctrines and practices that were globalized through the circulation of people (migration, travels, pilgrimages, etc), texts and images (Cesari, 2004; Haddad & Lummis, 1987; Kepel, 1991, 1997). Therefore I will compare the constitution of Muslim identities in Europe and South America in order to show how it is shaped by processes that connect local, national and transnational realities. For the case of Muslims in South America I will rely on the ethnographic data that I gathered in my research with the Muslim communities in Brazil.[2]

2 I gathered the ethnographic data for this article during my fieldwork with Muslim communities in Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, and São Paulo since 2003. This research has been sponsored with funding from CNPq and FAPERJ.

The Nation's Internal "Others": Muslims in Europe

The Muslim communities in Europe are often seen as the internal "other" of the nation, understood as a political community based on the idea of having shared cultural values, a common history and a collective destiny. Despite the fact that the Muslim presence in Europe goes back to the conquest of Spain in the eight century, that Muslim communities have existed for centuries in the Balkans and that Muslim merchants were a constant presence in the Mediterranean trading centers, such as Venice or Marseille, the image of the Muslims as a hostile alterity has dominated the cultural imaginary of the Europeans and informed the colonialist policies displayed in the European occupation of large portions of the Middle East and North Africa.

Although small Muslim communities existed in France since the seventeenth century and in England since the eighteenth century,[3] only after the Second World War that a significant number of Muslim immigrants established roots the Western European societies. In the 1950s and 1960s some European countries, such as Germany and Switzerland, actively promoted immigration from southern Europe, Turkey and North Africa in order to supply the lacking working force needed in the post-war economic recovery. Others, such as France

3 See Cesari, 2004, p. 25; Sellam, 2006, p. 17-20.

and England, accepted immigrants from their ex-colonies or, as Belgium and the Netherlands, from countries located in both shores of the Mediterranean. While this policy was initially envisaged as a temporary acceptance of needed foreign workers, it inscribed the immigrants in the constitution of the European societies.

After this policy ended under the impact of the 1973 oil crisis, most immigrants chose to stay in Europe and brought their families to live with them. The settlement of Muslim immigrants in various countries of Western Europe in the 1970s unleashed a double process. The immigrant communities started to create institutions that could organize and assure the maintenance of their cultural life and identities, as well as mediate their relation with the larger society and the nation-state. The creation of Muslim prayer-halls in the 1970s and the first mosques in the 1980s in most large European cities is part of this process.[4]

On the other hand, the signs of permanence of the Muslim immigrants and their descendants generated great cultural anxiety among the European societies. The general questioning about the possibility of "integration" of these immigrants was accompanied by a strong denial that communities of immigrant origin had

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4 One of the oldest Islamic institutions in Europe is the Mosque of Paris, created in 1926 in the framework of France's attempt to legitimate its colonial policies in Muslim-majority territories. By 2000 there were more than 6,000 mosques in Western Europe. See Cesari, 2004, p. 27; Kepel, 1991.

become a permanent feature of European societies. This denial was present even in societies that had received, and integrated, large numbers of immigrants during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, in France the second and third generations of French Muslims are still designated as "of immigrant origin" (*issu de l'immigration*) despite having French citizenship and being linguistically and, largely, culturally French.[5]

Therefore, the construction of Muslim identities in Europe is done in a context of increasing racialization of the definitions of the nation (Silverstein, 2004, p. 25-30). The success of right-wing parties and movements in France, England, Austria, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands and Denmark was built on the political manipulation of anxieties about the national identity, which would be under the demographic threat of the Muslim immigrants. This issue is aggravated by the fact that many European countries, such as Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Spain, adopt the *jus sanguis* to define citizenship, what makes very difficult for the descendants of the immigrants to become citizens. Other countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark, had liberal citizenship laws that allowed many immigrants and their descendants to get citizenship. However, under the pressure of right-wing parties these countries are adopting new steps that will

5 Even the pattern of religious practice among French Muslims born and/or raised in France is similar to that of Frenchmen of other religious confessions (Kepel, 1991).

require the immigrants to show their will and capacity of "cultural integration" before getting citizenship. Finally, in France, due the use of *jus solis*, England and Sweden,[6] most Muslim immigrants and their descendants have been granted citizenship.

Also, most European states have institutional relations with the religious communities that they harbor, what requires that the latter have a centralized organization or, at least, a representative body that can enter in official relations with the political establishment. Some countries, such as England, Greece and Denmark, have an official religion while grant freedom of worship and some sort of equality to the other confessions. Others, such as Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany, Switzerland and Austria, do not have a state religion but grant an official role to certain religious groups as partners in their system of governance. Even a deeply secular state, such as France, requires the religious communities to have a high degree of institutional organization in order to be recognized as full participants in the public sphere (Cesari, 2004, p. 100-19).

In most of these countries the Muslim communities do not have the centralized institutional organization required by the religious policies of the European nation

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6 Sweden is a unique case in Europe, as most of its Middle Eastern immigrants are Christians, mainly Syriac, Assyrian, Chaldean and Nestorians. However, the recent waves of Christian refugees coming from Iraq have raised a debate about the limits of the country's capacity of absorbing new immigrants.

states. This means that they are under continuous pressure to develop a centralized organization or representative apparatus that can present a "high level" interlocutor to the state. On the other hand, most European states have left the administration and governance of Muslim religiosity to the "countries of origin" of the immigrants. This was a way to give continuity to the idea that the presence of the Muslim immigrants and their descendents was transitory and, therefore, strange to the activities of the nation-state. So, there are Moroccan, Tunisian and Algerian mosques in France, and even the Mosque of Paris is controlled by the Algerian government (Kepel, 1991). In Germany most Turkish mosques are administered by the Diyanet, the religious bureaucracy of the Turkish state.

One of the effects of this policy was the perpetuation of a sense of "foreigness" in the second and third generations of Muslims in Western Europe. This created a fertile ground for the reconfiguration of religious and political movements from the Middle East and North Africa into the transnational processes of collusion, contention and appropriation that Paul Silverstein (2004, p. 7) defined as "*transpolitics*." These processes connect the cultural spaces of the Muslim-majority societies of Asia and Africa with the social contexts Muslims in Europe.

The transnational, hence diasporic, character of the Muslim communities does not make them more "foreign" or "non-integrated" than any other religious community. The intensity of their engagement with the European so-

cieties within which they exist can be seen in the role of intellectuals in trying to re-read the Islamic tradition in terms adequate to the social and cultural situation of the European Muslims. The iconic figure of this movement is the Swiss Muslim thinker established in France, Tariq Ramadan. The European Council of Fatwas created in London in 1997 can also be seen as an effort of creating a dialogical connection between the cultural context of the European Muslims and globalized codifications of the Islamic tradition. Even the cases of violent Islamic radicalism, such as the bombings in Madrid and London and the killing of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, are due as much to political upheavals in the Middle East, such as the invasion of Iraq and the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, as to the situation of marginalization and discrimination lived by many Muslims in Europe.

Therefore, the Muslim identities in Europe are constructed in a complex articulation of transnational discourses, practices and institutional connections, and local cultural and social contexts within the political and institutional framework set by the nation-state. Unfortunately there are very few ethnographic accounts of how these processes unfold in discrete social and cultural contexts, for the approach towards the Muslims in Europe has emphasized homogeneizing generalizations about their capacity of integration or, more often, their lack of it in the European societies. Despite the sociological and

institutional similarities shared by the various Muslim communities in each European country, a more detailed study case by case would surely reveal a great plurality of religious identities and practices due the discrete configuration of the processes that shape them. This methodological point will be exemplified in my analysis of the constitution of the Muslim identities and communities in Brazil.

Diasporic and Local: Muslims in Brazil

Brazil has a large Muslim community, close to one million strong,[7] which was formed since the XIXth century by diverse migration waves from the Middle East (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine) and by the conversion of non-Arab Brazilians.[8] The Muslim community is mostly

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7 The census of 2000 gives the number of 27,239 Muslims in Brazil. Muslim religious authorities speak of 1 to 2 million Muslims. Based on my ethnographic experience, the number of 1 million Muslims seems a plausible estimate.

8 The Muslim African slaves that were collectively known as the "*Malês*" in XVIIIth and XIXth centuries constituted the first organized Muslim community in Brazil. They led a slave uprising in 1835 in Bahia, known as the Revolt of the *Malês* (*Revolta dos Malês*). There is a XIXth century first-hand account of the Muslim communities in Rio de Janeiro, Salvador and Recife written by an Arab-speaking imam from the Ottoman Empire who stayed in Brazil from 1866 to 1869 (Al-Baghdadi, 2007). However, when the Arab speaking Muslim immigrants started to create the first Islamic institutions in Brazil in the early XXth century, the Islamic identity of the *Malês* was disappearing through conversion to Catholicism and/or to Afro-Brazilian religions, such

urban, with large concentrations in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Curitiba and Foz de Iguaçu. There are important sociological differences among communities in each of these sites. For example, the Muslim community in Rio de Janeiro has not received a significant influx of recent immigrants, a fact that makes the process of the creation and reformulation of Muslim identities more dependent of local and national cultural dynamics. In contrast, in the Muslim communities in São Paulo and Curitiba the production of Islamic identities is strongly influenced by transnational Islamic movements and by the constant contact with Islam as practiced in the Middle East. Muslims in these three communities tend to work primarily in commercial activities. There are, however, increasing numbers in qualified professions such as medicine, law, and engineering.

The majority of Muslims in Brazil are Arab immigrants and their descendents. Nevertheless, there is a growing number of non-Arab Brazilians that convert to Islam through personal relations, that is, through work relations, marriage, or friendship. The first Islamic institutions started to appear in Brazil in the 1920s, but they only gained force in relation to the "Syrian-Lebanese" or Palestinian associations in the 1980s. These ethnic organizations were largely dominated by Arab Chris-

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the *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*. There was no continuity between the *Malês* and the Muslim communities created by Arab immigrants in the XXth century. See Reis, 2003.

tians, who also maintained churches and institutions of their religious confessions (Greek Orthodox, Melchite, Maronite, etc). After the 1960 the fall in the numbers of the Christian immigration from the Middle East and the cultural assimilation of the descendants of the Arab immigrants in the mainstream Brazilian culture led to the decline of the Arab ethnic associations (Ruawi, 1989).

On the other hand the growing numbers of Muslim immigrant from the Middle East in the 1970s fostered the creation of Islamic institutions and the public affirmation of a specific Muslim identity that is associated to, but not submerged in the larger Arab identity. In the 1990s, Muslim organizations based in mosques or Sufi orders have also begun to undertake missionary work. While the Muslim communities in Brazil have approximately the same chronological evolution of those in Europe, with the first large influx of immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s and the creation of religious institutions in the 1980s and 1990s, they are inscribed very different symbolical, social and political contexts.

As most Muslim immigrants to Brazil came from the Arab Middle East—mainly Lebanon, Syria and Palestine—they were identified with the large Arab community already existing in Brazil.[9] The Arab im-

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9 There are no reliable estimates of the number of Arabs in Brazil, which of course would still vary according to the definition of "Arab" used in them. The Arab institutions and some scholars advance numbers that range between 4 and 8 million Arabs and their descendants in a population of 170 million Brazilians.

migrants that came to Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century were mostly Christians (Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Melchites, etc.) and they managed to overcome or minimize the effects of the widespread racism and discrimination directed against them in the 1930s and 1940s (Lesser, 2000, p. 87-135) through economic success and a strong investment in cultural capital, such as higher education for their sons and daughters, which created an impressive upwards social mobility (Truzzi, 1992).

The privileged social position reached by the Arab immigrants and their descendants in Brazil allowed them to be incorporated as "whites" in the racial classification that informs the Brazilian national discourse. While this assimilation is far from complete or unproblematic, as negative stereotypes associated with the image of the "*turcos*" (lit. "turks," term used to designate all immigrant from the Middle East and their descendants[10]) remain widespread in the Brazilian society, it allowed a high degree of accommodation of the Arab immigrants in the Brazilian society. The *jus soli* adopted by the Brazilian state allowed the automatic acquisition of citizenship by all the second generation born in Brazil.

The media discourse on terrorism after September 11 made more present some of the tensions underlying the

10 For the use of the term "*turco*" for Arab-speaking immigrants see Truzzi, 1992, p. 28; for the use of this term for designating Armenian immigrants see Grün, 1992, p. 24-35.

ambiguous insertion of the Arabs in the Brazilian society as whites who are, nonetheless, "marked" by cultural differences. This became more acute in the case of the Muslims, who became target of transnational political discourses that tried to link them with international conflicts and define them as a security threat (in particular the Muslim community in Foz do Iguaçu). However, despite the clear negative effects that these discourses had on the situation of the Muslims in Brazil,[11] they were challenged by other discourses that define the Brazilian nation in opposition to what is perceived as the imperialistic policies of the United States and their allies.[12] In this sense, the Muslim identities in Brazil inherited the ambiguous position of the Arab/Syrian-Lebanese ethnic identity to which were added more dramatic symbolic and political meanings.

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11 Many informants in my research told me that they were harassed in the streets, being the target of verbal abuses, such as "terrorist" or, in the case of women, "Bin Laden's wife." There were also a few cases of physical aggression.

12 The cultural legitimacy of these discourses for some sectors of the Brazilian society can be seen in their playful inscription in cultural artifacts and public spaces. Thus, masks depicting Bin Laden and Saddam Hussain were very popular attires in Rio's street carnival from 2002 to 2007. After September 11 a "Bin Laden Bar" and a "Bin Laden's Cave" snooker bar opened in Niterói. Also, the Brazilian surf champion named "Jihad" competed in surfing competitions with a surf-board painted with Bin Laden's face. The surfer was prevented to go to a competition in the US with his board although this kind of sanction never happened while he was competing in Brazil.

With this broader context in mind I will analyze here the construction of Muslim identities in Brazil in communities in Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, and São Paulo, as way to understand the processes that take place in each of these sites.

Islam Between Textual Universalism and Ethnic Distinction: The Islamic Mutual-Aid Society [Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana] of Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro's Muslim community has its religious center in the Islamic Mutual-Aid Society (SBMRJ), which has a prayer hall (*musala*) in a commercial building in Lapa, a neighborhood in downtown Rio. This is the only mosque currently operating in Rio de Janeiro, for the one built in the neighborhood of Jacarepaguá in the 1980s is closed due to fights between the leadership of the community and the builder of the mosque.[13] There is also the 'Alawi Club in the neighborhood of Tijuca, which serves as a space of sociability and for the celebration of 'Alawi rituals. [14]

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13 A new mosque is being built by the SBMRJ in Tijuca neighborhood.

14 'Alawis are an esoteric Shi'i sect that exists in Syria, Lebanon, and the south of Turkey. They do not follow the ritual pillars of Islam, such as the daily prayers at the mosque. They are considered by many Sunnis, such as the Salafis, to be heretics. The 'Alawis in Rio de Janeiro normally do not attend the SBMRJ.

The Muslim community in Rio is rather small in comparison to those in São Paulo, Mato Grosso or Paraná. The SBMRJ has an estimate of 5,000 Muslims in the whole state of Rio de Janeiro. However, despite the small size, the community in Rio is particularly interesting because it is one of the few in Brazil in which members are not predominantly of Arab origin. Instead, it is a multicultural and multi-ethnic group that brings together Arabs and their descendents, Africans (many whom are foreign students, in addition to immigrants from that continent), and non-Arab Brazilians who have converted from other religious traditions. These Brazilians are, in fact, the majority in the community, while Arabs and their descendents make up only 10% of the membership. The number of non-Arab Brazilian converts raised dramatically since 2000, when they constituted about half of the members of the community (Montenegro, 2000), reaching the level of 85% of the members in 2007. In socio-economic terms, the great majority of the members are small merchants in the SAARA (a traditional commercial area in downtown Rio, near the SBMRJ), or are employed in commerce, with a smaller number of university students and professionals (lawyers, veterinarians, etc.).

The multi-ethnic character of the Rio community leads to a complex process of construction of Muslim

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Some of them point to the Salafi tendencies of this institution as a factor that does not encourage them to attend its activities.

identities in interaction with Arabic linguistic and cultural traditions and with the Brazilian social and cultural reality. The Arabic language is valued as a key element of the religious universe of Islam, but not as one that determines Muslim identity. There is concern with teaching the language to the members of the community who are not of Arab origin (and even to those who do have this origin but have not mastered the classical Arabic of religious texts), in order to give them direct access to the sacred text of the Quran. Nonetheless, the lingua franca for religious activities, such as sermons or courses, is Portuguese, with the exception of ritual formulas such as "*bismallah al-rahman al-rahim*" ("in the name of God the compassionate and the merciful") or "*salam aleikum rahmatu-llah wa barakatu-hu*" ("may the peace, mercy, and grace of God be with you") that are always pronounced in Arabic. This shows the efforts of the SBMRJ's leadership in constructing a religious and linguistic milieu that is, to some extent, integrated to local culture. Even the verses of the Quran cited in Arabic during the Friday sermon are immediately followed by a Portuguese translation.

Nevertheless, the symbolic value of the Arabic language and Arab identity makes them markers of religious distinction within the community. During the informal gatherings that follow the religious rituals, it is common to see Arabic speakers use that language

in their interactions, marking an ethnic boundary that separates them from the rest of the community. Those who have Arab origins but do not speak the language are constantly the target of subtle teasing and jokes that reinforce the value of Arabic as a cultural diacritic constitutive of the ethnic boundary. Beyond that, it is also a significant fact that most of the positions of power and status within the community are occupied by Arabic speakers, clearly setting up an ethnic hierarchy.[15] The Imam Abdu also defines himself as Arab, notwithstanding the emphasis that he placed on his African origin after 2006 in order create a greater connection with the African immigrants and black Brazilian converts that compose the community at the SBMRJ.

Abdu legitimates his position as Imam, partially, through his Arab origin that, in principle, guarantees his linguistic mastery of Islam's textual tradition. This despite the fact that he does not have the necessary religious formation to be recognized as *shaykh* or *'alim* (religious scholar), since his studies in Libya were at a more general level. It is also noteworthy that he has gradually emphasized the link between his Arabic cultural identity and the performance in his personal life and in his sense of self of moral values that are construed as essentially Muslim. He has rearticulated

15 On the connections between religious knowledge, Arab language and power in the SBMRJ see the ethnography of Gisele Fonseca Chagas (2006).

his life and self through his marriage with a Moroccan woman who wears the veil (*hijab*), after the divorce from his first wife, a non-Muslim Brazilian.

Despite the relation between hierarchy and Arabic ethnicity in the religious division of labor within the SBMRJ, the leadership's public discourse promotes the dissemination of Islam and the incorporation of the converts into the community, a fact that is demonstrated by the centrality of educational activities, such as courses about Islam or "Muslim culture." Courses tend to focus on the challenges that Brazilian society and culture pose for Muslims, particularly for the recently converted or for recent immigrants. These courses touch upon subjects like the use of the veil, the prohibition against drinking alcohol or eating pork, and the interaction with non-Muslim friends and family members. These themes are mixed with other of global scope, such as the image of Islam and Muslims in the media, which is generally considered as holding hostile and misinformed views on these topics (Montenegro, 2002), the conflicts in the Middle East, and the terrorist attacks of September 11.

Muslim identities in the SBMRJ are not only constituted in contrast to the beliefs and practices of non-Muslims. They are also produced by the contrast among the different Islamic traditions that are represented among members of the community, according to their diverse origins. Since the dominant tradition in SBMRJ is Salafiyya, a Sunni reformist movement that emerged in the

XIXth century, which preaches a return to the "original Islam" that is codified in the Quran and Hadith (the collection of traditions the sayings and actions of the Prophet), differences in the ritual practices and doctrine within the community tend to be perceived as *bid'a* (condemnable innovations), that is, as deviations from "true" Islam that must be corrected.

Thus, the SBMRJ's religious leaders are very critical of other Muslim traditions such as Sufism, the cult of the saints or Shi'ism, seeking to avoid that members of the community fall into these other paths. In that sense, one can say that the multiethnic character of the community in Rio de Janeiro has generated an awareness of doctrinal and ritual differences among various Islamic traditions, leading to a search for the "true" Islam within the framework of a religious reform centered around the textual tradition. Thus, the disciplinary practices (Asad, 1993, p. 130-5) developed by the SBMRJ's religious authorities (sermons, courses, normative texts, etc.) have produced a process of "objectification" (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996, p. 48) of Islamic tradition, generating a "purified" religious system of cultural and social practices that serves as a conscious normative point for reference in the life of the faithful. That "objectified" Islam facilitates the integration of converts, relegating cultural difference to the background and bringing everyone under the same religious discipline.

Ethnicity Overcoming Sectarianism: The Muslim Community in Curitiba

The Muslim community in Curitiba has about 5,000 families (20,000 people)[16] affiliated to the mosque of Imam Ali Ibn Abu Talib. This mosque was constructed in 1977 in an "international Islamic" style, with minarets, horseshoe arches, and a dome. The Muslim society, which is at the same time a social club and a mutual-aid institution, is composed almost exclusively by Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Egyptian immigrants and their descendants. Form 2003 to 2005 its leader was a Shi'i *shaykh*, *shaykh* Mahdi, who was educated in Lebanon and was, prior to coming to Curitiba, the Imam of the Muslim community in Santiago, Chile, which was, according to him, "made up almost completely of Lebanese and Palestinians."

In the Muslim community in Curitiba, my conversations and interviews were almost always conducted in Arabic or in a mixture of Arabic and Portuguese. This community has been functioning since the decade of the 1950s, with the creation of a Muslim society. Shaykh Mahdi stressed in an interview that

> the community in Curitiba was very smart to create first a club and then worry about building a mosque, since the club allows for the integration of families, and particularly, keeps the youth together and interested in Islam. If young Muslims do not do

16 This number was given to me by the vice-president of the Islamic Mutual-Aid Association of Curitiba during an interview in February 2008.

> things together and feel that Islam is just about praying at the mosque or following the rules of the religion, they will eventually lose interest in becoming good Muslims.

Despite the fact that the community in Curitiba has a strong Arab character, it shows an important sectarian division as half of the members are Sunnis and half Shi'is. Since the 1970s, when the civil war in Lebanon and the Israeli invasion of South Lebanon intensified the migration flows, the presence of Shi'is in the community has grown. The mosque was built in 1977 as a Sunni mosque and it remained so until 1986, when the government of Iran, in its policy of disputing with Saudi Arabia the finance and control of international Islam, offered significant donations to the mosque. Following that, there was always a Shi'i *shaykh* leading the mosque. The presence of Iran is immediately felt in the beautiful *mihrab* (the niche that marks the direction of Mecca) of mosaic tiles in Persian style, with the inscription in Arabic and Portuguese: "Gift from the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1996."

According to *shaykh* Mahdi, the fervor to promote a revolutionary and militant Shi'ism supported by Iran alienated many Sunnis in the community and the Iran-Iraq war exacerbated the tensions between the two groups to the point that the community was on the verge of fragmenting or dissolving. In the words of the *shaykh* Mahdi:

> it was a difficult time. To give you an idea, the Islamic school that was created at the same time as the Muslim society had

> to close because it was impossible to reach consensus on the content of its religious curriculum.[17]

The *shaykh* added that the situation only began to change with his predecessor, who toned down the politico-religious militancy of his discourse. He also withdrew from the mosque all political or sectarian symbols, such as portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini or images of the holy figures of Shi'ism. Thus, a supra-sectarian Muslim identity began to be constructed through the emphasis of doctrinal and ritual elements shared by Sunnis and Shi'is.

At present, although ritual differences among Sunis and Shi'is are evident in the collective prayers, these differences are understood and integrated as variations within a spectrum of legitimate practices. In the mosque, clay tablets (generally made of sacred soil from Karbala, Iraq) are accessible in a box for those who wish their heads to touch a natural material during prayer. Sunnis do not have this obligation. One of the consequences of such an effort at integration is the tendency to minimize the ritual and doctrinal boundaries or abandon the mechanisms of exclusion used by sectarian groups to mark their identity. As such, the rule of ritual purity demanded by

17 The Islamic school reopened in 2007 with 20 students in the elementary level. Half of the students were non-Muslims. The curriculum is similar to other Brazilian schools, with optional classes on Islam and Arabic language. According to the vice-president of the Islamic society many non-Muslims take the optional classes.

the Shi'i tradition according to which a Shi'i cannot pray behind of a non-Shi'i, is not followed in the mosque in Curitiba. Shi'is and Sunis freely mix among the rows during prayer. By the same token, the *adhan* (the call to prayer) does not include the piece only used by Shi'i, which elevate 'Ali (cousin and successor of Mohammed) to the level of the Prophet.

At the doctrinal level, overcoming sectarian differences entails a certain degree of objectification of Islam. The common denominator is deliberately found in the Quran. However, in contrast to the community in Rio de Janeiro, the process of "objectification" in Curitiba is not based on a conscious and integrated religious system that encompasses daily practices, but on an interpretive consensus anchored on shared doctrinal understandings and ritual practices. This strategy allowed for the incorporation of values and practices from the Arab culture in the religious worldview of the community in Curitiba. There is then an "ethnification" of Islam as a "religion of Arabs in Brazil," an inward-looking religious universe, resistant to the incorporation of new members and to integration into the larger society. Indeed, the *shaykh* confirmed that the community does not have any missionary or *tabliq* strategy, or one to integrate the few converts.[18]

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18 Since 2005 some members of the community, such as the vice president of the Islamic society, have been trying to develop a work of spreading Islam among the larger society by providing information and opening the mosque for public visitation on Sunday mornings. Also a course started to be held in the

These converts, who are generally university students who came into contact with Islam through their studies, confront a serious and powerful linguistic barrier in the community, since rituals, sermons, and a large part of the conversation, take place in Arabic, accompanied in few occasions by translation to Portuguese.

The relation that the Curitiba community has with Brazilian society follows the dynamic of an "ethno-religious enclave," similar to those, for example, in the Jewish and Armenian communities in Brazil. But this does not thwart a deep integration into the local social and cultural universe in other realms of life (work, friendships, etc.).

Diverse Identities and Institutional Pluralism: The Muslim Community in São Paulo

The city of São Paulo offers a unique context for the articulation of Muslim identity within the larger field of Islam in Brazil. Due to the community's demographics, ethnic and religious diversity as well as the multiplicity of institutions present, there are various levels and forms of belonging.[19] However, most communities in

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mosque in 2007, in order to teach about Islam to converts and non-Muslims.

19 In the absence of precise, or even reliable, numbers, I feel that it is reasonable to extrapolate from the communities I studied that there are about 250,000 Muslim in the Greater São Paulo region, which is about 25% of the Muslim population in Brazil.

São Paulo have a clear Arab cultural character, being constituted mostly of Lebanese, Palestinian or Syrian immigrants. This ethnic character is more apparent among the Shi‘i community.

The Muhammad Raçulullah[20] mosque, also know as the Brás Mosque, is the religious center of the Shi’i community in São Paulo. Although the mosque has only 3,000 member, only a fraction overall Shi’i community in the city (which stands at 20,000), it is considered the center of Shi’i identity within the Muslim community. Until 2007 the mosque was led by *shaykh* Said Hassan Ibrahim, born in Nabatiya, in South Lebanon, but raised in Beirut and educated in Qom, Iran. The mosque is located in Elisa Whitaker Street, in the center of the textile commercial sector of the Brás neighborhood, which is dominated by Muslim merchants and Korean entrepreneurs. The labor force in the wholesale stores, which are mostly owned by Muslims, is from the north-east of Brazil (*nordestina*), while illegal Bolivian immigrants staff the clothing factories owned by Koreans. That ethnic and religious diversity among business owners and workers in textile production and commerce is reproduced in the multiple religious institutions and spaces that shape the urban landscape of Brás. Thus, that neighborhood concentrates three Muslim institu-

20 This awkward transliteration in Portuguese of *Muhammad Rasul Allah* (Mohammed, the Prophet of God) stands on the main entrance of the mosque.

tions: the Shi'i mosque, the Salah al-Din Mosque and the Islamic Youth League, the last two of which are Sunni. Beyond that, there is the Bolivian Cultural Center and many bars and *forrós* (public dance halls) that bring together migrants from the northeast.

Within that context of ethnic and religious pluralism, the Shi'i mosque appears as a space for the construction, assertion, and maintenance of an identity that blends diasporic religious elements (the *umma* of global Islam) and ethnic dimensions (the Lebanese diaspora) with the sectarian affirmation of transnational Shi'ism. The architecture of the Brás Mosque shows a process of "Persianization" of the religious imagination of Shi'i communities around the world through aesthetic and visual elements that link transnational Shi'ism with the religious and cultural history of Iran. This process is actively encouraged by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which finances the construction or reconstruction of mosques and sacred places.[21]

The mosque community is almost exclusively composed of Lebanese immigrants and their descendants and has a clear Arabic identity. Although the small Iranian community in São Paulo has the Brás Mosque

21 That investment by the Iranian government is evident in Syria, where the sacred places linked to Shi'i sacred history were reconstructed to exhibit a clear Shi'i religious character. Many places like the tomb of Sayda Zaynab in Damascus, which used to have a strong Sufi presence, were recreated within an aesthetic framework derived from Persian architecture. See Pinto, 2007.

as the institutional and spatial reference point of their religious identity as Shi'i Muslims, the Iranians almost never attend ritual activities, such as daily or community prayers, meetings or get-togethers which take place regularly at the mosque. The Iranian presence only becomes visible during the most important celebrations of the Shi'i calendar, such as Ashura which is the commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn, Muhammad's grandson, at the battle of Karbala, Iraq. The Iranians' distancing is surprising at first sight, given that *shaykh* Said had his training in Iran. However, some Iranians with whom I talked told me that the intellectual connection of the *shaykh* with Iran is not an attractive feature. Many of them left Iran disappointed with the political and economic direction of the Islamic Republic and they do not have any interest in what they define as "official Islam," the religious interpretation favored by Iranian state, which is the point of reference for *shaykh* Said.[22]

There is a small group of converts (about 40) in the Shi'i mosque. Some of the converts told me that they were attracted to Shi'i Islam by its role in the struggle against North American imperialism and in defense of the people's right to self-determination, as well as by the message of solidarity, equality, and social justice.

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22 On the social and political disappointment and indifference, and religious individualization that characterize contemporary Iranian society, see Adelkhakh, 2000; Roy & Khosrokhavar, 1999.

For them Islam has all the characteristics of a religion and a political ideology founded in a Third-World perspective, which can also be found among the followers of liberation theology in Latin American Catholicism. The Iranian revolution and Hizbollah's resistance to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon are some of the things cited by those converts to explain their option for Shi'ism, which they consider "purer" and more "revolutionary" than Sunni Islam.

Other converts told me that they were introduced to Islam by friends or their colleagues at work who are Shi'is. According to them, after some visits to the mosque and conversations with Muslims, they were impressed by the solidarity and mutual respect for religious inspiration that members showed to each other. They then converted. Finally, four members of the religious course held at the mosque said that they became interested in Islam through news reports or through Muslim friends or acquaintances. After visiting the mosque and learning about the doctrinal principles, they converted because they were convinced by what they defined as the religious truth of Islam.

Conclusion

The analysis shows how the Muslim communities in Europe and Brazil are marked by a plurality of identities, practices and forms of organization. The appropriation, interpretation, practice and experience of the discrete

Islamic traditions in a diasporic context is informed by the local social and cultural context of each Muslim community, as well as by the multiple connections that they establish with globalized and transnational Islamic discourses and practices. Therefore, there is a need of detailed ethnographic studies for the understanding of the multiple configurations of the processes that inform the constitution and the dynamics of affirmation of the religious identities among the Muslim communities in Europe and South America.

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