

Religious knowledge and cultural creativity in the making of Islamic pluralism in Brazil

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Brazil has a large Muslim population,¹ which was formed since the late nineteenth century by successive waves of migration from the Middle East (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine) and by the conversion of Brazilians. The Muslim communities are mostly urban, the largest ones being those in São

1. The census of 2010 gives the number of 35,167 Muslims in Brazil. Muslim religious authorities speak of 1 to 2 million Muslims in the country. Raymond Delval, in his book *Les Musulmans en Amérique Latine et aux Caraïbes*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1992, estimated the number of Muslims in Brazil to be 200,000 in 1983 (p. 201). In 2010 the Pew Forum estimated the Muslim population Brazil as being 204,000 (<http://features.pewforum.org/muslim-population-graphic/#/Brazil>). I consider, based on my ethnographic experience with several Muslim communities in Brazil, that plausible estimates for 2014 could range between 100,000 and 200,000 Muslims in Brazil.

Paulo, Foz de Iguaçu, Curitiba, São Bernardo do Campo, Brasília and Rio de Janeiro. Nevertheless, there are important sociological differences between 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 processes of the construction and transmission of Muslim identities more dependent on local and national cultural dynamics. In contrast, in the other above-mentioned Muslim communities 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.²

246 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.³ The Arab immigrants that came to Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century were mostly Christians and they managed to overcome or minimize the effects of the widespread racism and discrimination directed against them in the 1930s and 1940s, such as their stigmatization as backward, fanatical and greedy “orientals” called as *turcos* (Turks) by a large part

2. The data analyzed here were gathered in several periods of ethnographic fieldwork that I have done in the Muslim communities in Rio de Janeiro and Curitiba since 2003. These ethnographies were made possible by research grants given by CNPq and Faperj.

3. See John Karam, *Another arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese ethnicity in neoliberal Brazil*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, p. 10-3.

of the Brazilian intellectual elite.⁴ This was done 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.⁵

The media discourse on terrorism after September 11 made more evident some of the tensions underlying the ambiguous insertion of the Arabs in Brazilian society as whites who are, nonetheless, “marked” by cultural differences. This became more acute in the case of the Muslims, who became the 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). These discourses had clearly negative effects on the situation of the Muslims in Brazil. Many informants 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 in Rio and São Paulo.

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However, the stigmatization of Arabs and Muslims as “terrorists” was 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. This tense relation with the USA in the Brazilian na-

4. Jeffrey Lesser, *A negociação da identidade nacional: imigrantes, minorias e a luta pela etnicidade no Brasil*, São Paulo, Unesp, 2000, p. 87-135.

5. Oswaldo Truzzi, *Patrícios: sírios e libaneses em São Paulo*, São Paulo, Hucitec, 1997.

tionalist discourse made a large portion of the Brazilian public opinion see the 09/11 terrorist attacks as a “retaliation” provoked by the very imperialist policies that are fostered by the Americans in the Middle East.

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. With this broader context in mind, I will analyze here the construction of Muslim identities and codifications of the Islamic tradition in Rio de Janeiro and Curitiba as a way to understand how a plurality of Muslim identities and ways of understanding and living the tenets of Islam emerges from the interaction between
248 immigrant traditions, local and national cultural realities and the transnational appropriation of Islamic religious knowledge produced in the Middle East and Europe.

The Muslim community of Rio de Janeiro

The Sunni Muslim community in Rio is rather small in comparison to those in São Paulo or Paraná. The leaders of the community estimate that there are 5,000 Muslims in the whole province of Rio de Janeiro, with more or less 1,000 of them being directly or indirectly connected with the Muslim Charitable Society of Rio de Janeiro (Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana do Rio de Janeiro, SBM-RJ), which constitutes the religious and institutional center of the community.⁶ Until 2007 the religious activities of

6. The incertitude of the numbers is reproduced on the local level, as the Muslim institutions do not keep systematic records of their members or

the Sunni Muslim community took place in a prayer hall (*musala*) in a commercial building in downtown Rio. Since that date the religious activities moved to a new mosque that is being built in the Tijuca neighborhood. This is the only mosque currently operating in Rio de Janeiro, for the mosque built in the neighborhood of Jacarepaguá in 1983 has been closed since the mid-1990s. There is one *musala* downtown and another in Copacabana. There is also the 'Alawi Muslim Charitable Society in Tijuca, which serves as a space of sociability and for the celebration of 'Alawi rituals, such as 'Ashura and the *Mawlid al-Nabawi* (Birthday of the Prophet).⁷

Despite its small size, the Sunni Muslim community in Rio is particularly interesting because it is the largest one in Brazil in which members are not predominantly of Arab origin. The history of this community is marked by a series of cultural reorientations that allowed it to create a

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of the families that constitute the community. Raymond Delval recorded that he was told in 1983 that there were 12,000 Muslims in the state of Rio de Janeiro, of which 5,000 lived in the city of Rio, while there were only 60 members registered in the Muslim Charitable Society of Rio de Janeiro (Delval, *Les Musulmans*, p. 233-9). The 2010 demographic census registered only 964 Muslims in Rio de Janeiro, which is Brazil's second largest city with about 6.3 million inhabitants.

7. 'Alawis are a Shi'i sect that exists in Syria, Lebanon, and southern Turkey. The 'Alawi community in Rio performs the Friday prayers in the prayer-hall at their Society and celebrates some holy dates, such as *'Ashura* and the *Mawlid al-Nabawi*. The 'Alawis in Rio de Janeiro usually do not attend the religious activities at the (Sunni) Muslim Charitable Society of Rio de Janeiro. Some 'Alawis told me that the Salafi tendencies of the Sunni community discourage them to attend the mosque or to engage in the activities of the SBMRJ.

form of insertion in the local society based on the incorporation of new members through the conversion of Brazilians. The result is a multicultural and multiethnic community that includes Arabs and their descendants, Africans (many whom are foreign students or immigrants), and non-Arab Brazilians who have converted to Islam from other religious traditions. The non-Arab Brazilians are, in fact, the majority in the community, while Arabs and their descendants make up only 10% of the membership. The number of non-Arab Brazilian converts has increased dramatically since 2000, when they constituted about half of the members of the community,⁸ reaching the level of 85% of the members in 2007.

250 The first Muslim institution in Rio de Janeiro was the ‘Alawi Muslim Charitable Society of Rio de Janeiro (Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana Alauíta do Rio de Janeiro), created in 1931 by ‘Alawi immigrants from Syria. While the Society was linked to the ‘Alawi community, its founding charter states that it is devoted to take care of “everything related to the interests of those affiliated to the ‘Alawi Muslim rite in particular, and of the Muslims in general”.⁹ This pan-Islamic horizon allowed the ‘Alawi Society to serve as religious institution to the Sunni Muslims and its *shaykh* to be their religious leader for decades,

8. Silvia Montenegro, *Dilemas identitários do Islã no Brasil*, PhD dissertation, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2000.

9. *Estatutos da Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana Alauíta do Rio de Janeiro*, p. 3-4.

despite the religious differences between the two branches of Islam.¹⁰

The Sunni Muslims only created the Muslim Charitable Society of Rio de Janeiro (SBMRJ), in 1951.¹¹ Though an institutional reference for the Sunni Muslim community, it held no religious activities. In 1970, with funding from Saudi Arabia, an Egyptian *shaykh* trained in Al-Azhar became the *imam* of the Sunni community and all its religious rituals, such as the daily prayers, started to be performed in the *musala* of the SBMRJ. This move created in practice two Muslim communities in Rio de Janeiro, one a Sunni and the other an 'Alawi, which remained connected for some time before eventually developing divergent histories.

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The emphasis on the religious aspects of the SBMRJ was accompanied by other efforts to mobilize the Sunni Muslims in Rio de Janeiro—which by 1970 were almost all immigrants from Lebanon, Syria and Palestine and their descendants—around their religious identity. Besides the daily prayers held at the *musala* of the SBMRJ, these efforts were directed to transmitting a Muslim identity and Islamic religious knowledge to the descendants of the Muslim immigrants who were born in Rio. Therefore, during

10. Paulo G. H. R. Pinto, *Árabes no Rio de Janeiro: uma identidade plural*, Rio de Janeiro, Ed. Cidade Viva, 2010, p. 119-21.

11. I found no evidence to support Raymond Delval's reference of 1930 as the year of the founding of the (Sunni) Muslim Charitable Society (Delval, *Les Musulmans*, p. 234). He has probably mistaken the Sunni Society for the 'Alawi one, which was created in 1931.

the 1970s the Sunni Muslim community in Rio de Janeiro saw its religious identity as part of a cultural heritage brought to Rio by immigrants from the Middle East and that should be transmitted to the new generations.

252 After a long decline in the number of members, this situation was reverted after 1997, when a group of Muslims born or raised in Rio introduced reforms that changed completely the cultural orientation of the SBMRJ and, therefore, of the community itself. At that time the SBMRJ was directed by a Sudanese, Abdu, who had incomplete religious studies in Libya and served as the *imam* of the community. Abdu, together with some members of the community, in particular two brothers born in Rio of Syrian descent, who had studied Arabic and one year of Islamic jurisprudence at the Islamic University of Medina, started to change the codification of Islam officially fostered by the community. They emphasized the universalistic aspect of Islam and, adopting a Salafi framework, tried to present it as a religious system “free” of Middle Eastern cultural references. This approach contrasted with the one previously dominant in the community, which strongly connected Muslim identity to Arab cultural diacritics.

This change in the codification of Islam was accompanied by a series of transformations that aimed to widen the audience of the religious discourses produced by the leaders of the community. Thus, Portuguese gradually replaced Arabic as the main language of the Friday sermons, which allowed both Muslims of Arab descent born in Brazil and Brazilian converts to participate in one of the community’s

main arenas of transmission of religious knowledge. Also, courses in Arabic, History of Islam and “Islamic Culture” started to be offered to Muslims and non-Muslims, creating an important arena of socialization for Muslims born in Brazil and converts to Islam, as well as a channel of dialogue with the larger Brazilian society.

These courses allowed the leaders of the community to give more visibility to their codification of Islam as well as to their criticism of the negative representations of Muslims and Islam that circulated in the Brazilian society and media. Furthermore, the courses also created an instance of cultural mediation between various representations, expectations and doubts that the students had in relation to Islam and the religious codification fostered by the leaders of the SBMRJ. This nourished the intellectual curiosity of some of the non-Muslim students, who gradually became more personally involved with the form of Islam practiced by the Muslim community in Rio de Janeiro. In addition to the universalistic codification of Islam and the adoption of Portuguese as the main linguistic context of the religious discourses, this discursive arena provided an important channel to attract prospective converts to the community.

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The number of converts increased steadily, gaining momentum after 2001, when the greater visibility that Islam attained in the cultural imaginary of the Brazilian society enhanced the dynamics of conversion. After a few years, converts constituted the absolute majority of the Muslims in Rio, changing the cultural and religious character of the community. As the process of conversion to Islam in the

Muslim community in Rio is centered on the acquisition of a Muslim identity through individual commitment to the beliefs, practices, rules and norms of Islam as they are defined and codified by the community, the increase in the number of converts led to an individualization of Muslim religiosity.

254 Indeed, the individual is the target of the official religious discourses that circulate in the community. The sermons emphasize individual responsibility, rational choice and conscious intention as the bases of faith. All collective rituals—such as daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan or the Pilgrimage of the Hajj—are the object, at the appropriate period of the religious calendar, of sermons that emphasize that their religious merits are only valid if they are performed with the full rational and emotional engagement of the individual. It is a recurrent theme in the discourse of the leadership of the community that Muslim identity is not inherited, but rather something that is achieved through the acquisition of religious knowledge and the conscious shaping of one's behavior according to the moral rules of Islam.

This kind of religiosity that connects religious knowledge is based on the codification of Islam that is fostered by the leadership of the SBMRJ. The leaders of the Muslim community in Rio define their understanding and practice of Islam as deriving from the *Salafiyya*. According to them, Islam is a definite and bounded set of beliefs, rules and moral norms that are inscribed in the Qur'an and the Hadith. One of the leaders of the SBMRJ summarized this position during a course in 2008, by saying that

Islam is what is stated in the Qur'an and in the traditions of the Prophet, peace be upon him. That is the Islam of the revelation. After that, because of historical reasons and influence of culture and other religions, people started to interpret and add things, creating variation and deviation from the original message. Here in the SBMRJ we think that these other practices and beliefs might seem correct to those who follow them, but we don't accept them for us.

Nevertheless, the religious authorities of the Sunni community in Rio de Janeiro have a very particular interpretation of the Salafiyya, which for them is mainly the idea that all aspects of Muslim religiosity should be grounded in the Qur'an and the Hadith. They do not follow the literalist or political trends of the Salafiyya,¹² framing their interpretation of Islamic doctrines as a moral discourse centered on the individual who aims to insert his or herself into the larger society as a pious Muslim. This orientation towards creating a Muslim religious life in a non-Muslim society leads the leaders of the community to adopt positions that could be better classified as "modernist" rather than "Salafi", usually drawing inspiration from European or North-American Muslim sources.

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One example is the official position of the SBMRJ on female converts who were already married to non-Muslim husbands before their conversion. According to one of the brothers who delivers the Friday sermon (*khutba*), as there is no consensus among the Islamic scholars on the issue of whether the marriage would still be valid or not, it is up to each individual female convert to decide if she will remain

12. Bernard Rougier, "Introduction", in Bernard Rougier (ed.), *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2008, p. 15-9.

married to her non-Muslim husband or not. This opinion is inspired by a similar decision by the European Council for Fatwa and Research. Similar issues of whether it is licit or not to work in a bar, to celebrate one's birthday, or to eat in non-Muslim houses where pork is served with other food, are also left up to the individual conscience of each member of the community.

This "Salafi minimalism" was possible because the community has traditionally refused to receive *shaykhs* appointed by other religious institutions, in particular those from Saudi Arabia.¹³ However, since 2012 there has been a process of integration of the community with the Islamic institutions based in São Paulo and, through them, with the
256 globalized networks of patronage that spring from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. In 2014 a new *imam*, a Brazilian who studied in Sudan, was appointed to the mosque and a more assertive form of the *Salafiyya* became the normative reference in the community.

The SBMRJ also offers spaces and alternative forms of sociability to the Brazilian cultural traditions that are seen as "un-Islamic", such as Carnival, which is particularly present in the everyday life of the Muslims in Rio. During Carnival there are "Islamic Camping" or "Spiritual Retreat" activities, usually held on farms or in hotels in the countryside. On these occasions, those who want can retreat to an "Islamic" environment where leisure activi-

13. Sílvia Montenegro, "Identidades muçulmanas no Brasil: entre o arabismo e a islamização", *Lusotopie*, n. 2, 2002, p. 59-79.

ties, such as sports or hiking, are mixed with praying and the study of Islam.¹⁴ Other traditions linked to urban middle-class culture such as Mother's Day or Children's Day sometimes also receive an "Islamic" version in the SBMRJ or are just commented on in the sermon about how a Muslim should behave during their celebration.

On the other hand, the SBMRJ is very conscious of its position in Rio's religious sphere, in which the Muslim community tries to inscribe itself as part of the local "religious diversity" with a discourse of tolerance and coexistence. Since 2008 a delegation from the Muslim community participates in the annual "March against Religious Intolerance",¹⁵ where it shares with other religious traditions, such as Catholicism, Judaism and African-Brazilian religions (*Candomblé* and *Umbanda*), a space of belonging to Rio's religious imaginary. This performative affirmation of the Muslim community as part of the local religious landscape is an important way of presenting Islam as a legitimate alternative for conversion in Rio's "religious market". The construction of a new mosque, the

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14. This creation of alternative spaces of religious sociability is not exclusive to Muslims, as devote Catholics and Evangelical Christians also have their "spiritual retreats" in order to avoid the festivities of Carnival.

15. This march was created in 2008 after episodes of violence between members of evangelical churches and adepts of the African-Brazilian cults. Almost all religious groups, including the Catholic Church and the Jewish community, participate in this march that takes place on the Copacabana beach promenade, but many Evangelical churches refuse to participate, saying that they are being the real victims of the intolerance of the other religious groups.

Mesquita da Luz (Mosque of Light), in 2007, can also be seen as a way of inscribing Muslim religiosity into Rio's urban landscape.

The importance of the efforts to create a religious codification of Islam, as well as mechanisms for its transmission (sermons and texts in Portuguese, courses) that were adapted to the local social and cultural conditions of the Muslim community in Rio, must not prevent us from seeing that they are also connected to processes that point to transnational religious horizons. The processes of localizing Islam in Rio are usually coupled with others that globalize the religious imagination of the carioca Muslims.¹⁶ This is particularly true of the converts, whose socialization in the doctrines, practices, and values of Islam is allied with the construction of a transnational religious imagination centered on the Middle East and its holy sites. Friday sermons occasionally talk about the past and present religious and political situation of the Middle-Eastern societies. Examples of Muslims living in Europe, China or the USA are also often used as moralizing stories in the sermons.

Many converts take the Arabic language course, aiming to read the quranic text in its original version, but also to acquire enough linguistic competence to be able to interact with Middle Eastern cultural and religious realities. Others go to spend some time living in Syria, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia in order to study Arabic and “learn how

16. The word “carioca” means someone who was born in Rio.

life is in a Muslim society”, as summarized by one convert who had lived in Syria. The *hajj* (Pilgrimage to Mekka) is another occasion for the converts to gain an experiential dimension to the transnational religious imagination that connects them to the sacred site in the Middle East. All these experiences of direct contact and acquisition of first-hand knowledge of the Arab Muslim societies of the Middle East provide the Sunni converts in Rio de Janeiro with a form of cultural and religious capital that allows them to affirm their Muslim identity and their belonging to the *umma* on equal terms with those born Muslim.

Furthermore, there is an intense use of the internet by the members of the Sunni community in Rio de Janeiro for searching Islamic references on various topics pertaining to their everyday lives and/or intellectual questionings. This is particularly true among the converts, who do not have Islamic normative models embedded in their family traditions. Most of the religious knowledge is searched on English-language Islamic webpages, usually created and maintained by European and North-American Muslims faced with issues similar to those of the Brazilian Muslims living as a minority in a non-Muslim society. Also, English versions of Arab, mainly Saudi, webpages are another source of religious knowledge among the Sunni Muslim in Rio de Janeiro. Online access to sermons, texts and *fatwas* of the late Mufti of Saudi Arabia, shaykh ‘Abd al-Aziz Ibn al-Baz, was an important tool for acquiring religious guidance among Brazilian converts to Islam during the early 2000s. Those who master Arabic can access Arabic-lan-

guage Islamic webpages, thereby enlarging the horizon of their religious imagination.

It is interesting to note that important Islamic religious authorities and intellectuals in the international arena have played a very marginal, or even inexistent, role as sources of religious knowledge among the Sunni Muslims in Rio de Janeiro. For example, the Qatar-based Egyptian shaykh, Yussuf al-Qaradawi, was known only by a few of the members of the Sunni community in Rio de Janeiro and almost never cited as a source of Islamic knowledge. Similarly, Tariq Ramadan is used as a religious reference by the intellectual leadership of the Sunni Muslim community in Rio de Janeiro, but is seldom read by the other members of the community.

In summary, the disciplinary practices developed by the SBMRJ's religious authorities (sermons, courses, normative texts, etc.) have produced a process of "objectification" of Islamic tradition, generating a religious system of cultural and social practices that serves as a conscious normative point of reference in the life of the faithful.¹⁷ This "objectified" Islam, presented as a local form of the *Salafiyya*, facilitates the integration of the converts in the community, downplaying the cultural differences between individuals and allowing the construction of an inclusive Muslim identity that connects the local realities of the Muslims of Rio de Janeiro with the transnational hori-

17. For a definition of the process of "objectification" in contemporary Muslim contexts, see: Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 38.

zons of their religious imagination. On the other hand, the members of the community look for religious guidance and knowledge in several sources available on English and Arabic webpages, creating transnational connections to other Muslim communities. The Islamic knowledge produced by European and North-American Muslims is an important reference, as it deals with issues created by living as a minority in a non-Muslim community, but Middle-Eastern productions of Islamic knowledge, in particular from the religious authority of Saudi Arabia, has a normative aura, as it is linked to the sacred territorial core of the transnational Muslim community.

The Muslim community in Curitiba

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The Muslim community in Curitiba, a prosperous city of about 1.7 million inhabitants and capital of the state of Paraná in southern Brazil, has about 5,000 members.¹⁸ In 1957 the Muslim Charitable Society of Paraná (*Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana do Paraná*) was created as a space where the members of the community could meet and socialize. This community has always gathered Sunni and Shi'i members.

Thus, it is not surprising that the first project to keep the new generations born in Brazil committed to their Muslim identities was centered on the transmission of the Arabic

18. This number was given to me by the vice-president of the Muslim Charitable Society of Paraná during an interview in January 2012. Until 2008 the leaders of the Society talked about 5,000 families. The 2010 demographic census registered 1,307 Muslims in Curitiba.

language with the creation of an Islamic school. The Escola Islâmica do Paraná (Paraná Islamic School) was founded in 1969 with 60 students, all from Muslim families.¹⁹ The school followed the Brazilian national curriculum with classes on Islam and the Arabic language. Although many Muslim families sent their children to study in the school, the number of students was not enough to supply the financial needs of the institution, which depended on donations from other members of the community to maintain its activities. The financial difficulties and conflicts between the *shaykh* and other members of the community led to the closing of the Islamic school in 1972.²⁰

262 The end of the Paraná Islamic School also reflected a shift in the mechanisms of transmission of religious identity and maintenance of the community among the Muslims in Curitiba, for it coincides with the construction of the Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib Mosque in 1972.²¹ This mosque, which was built in “international Islamic” style, with minarets, horseshoe arches, and a dome pointed to a greater importance of religious practices as an arena of affirmation and transmission of the Muslim identity. While the Muslim community had at least two major religious tra-

19. Wanessa M. R. Storti, *Educação árabe em Curitiba: a escola islâmica do Paraná (1969–1972)*, MA Thesis, Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, 2011, p. 44.

20. Storti, *Educação árabe em Curitiba*, p. 73.

21. The Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib mosque in Curitiba is the second oldest mosque in Brazil, having been built twelve years after the Mesquita Brasil in São Paulo.

ditions, Sunnism and Shi'ism, informing the religious beliefs and practices of its members, throughout the 1970's the mosque was led by Egyptian Sunni *shaykhs* graduated from the University of Al-Azhar.²²

This arrangement lasted until 1983, when it was unsettled by changes internal and external to the community. The growing immigration from South Lebanon made the number of Shi'is grow in the community until they comprised half of its members. In the international arena, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 created new models of Shi'i identity, providing many Shi'is with more assertive ways of expressing their religious identity. Likewise, the Islamic Republic installed in Iran started to make funding available for Islamic institutions and communities to export its interpretation of Islam and to dispute with Saudi Arabia religious and political influence in international Islamic arenas. In this context the Shi'i members of the community secured funding from Iran for the *shaykh's* salary, as well as for the maintenance and decoration of the mosque. Indeed, until 2012—when both the interior and exterior of the mosque were covered with mosaic tiles in Persian style—the Persian carpets covering the floor of the mosque, the framed verses from the Qur'an in Persian cal-

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22. The first *shaykh* arrived in 1967, before the construction of the mosque, in order to organize the religious life of the community. From 1957 to 1967, religious rituals were informally officiated by a member of the community (Omar Nasser Filho, *O crescente e a estrela na terra dos pinheirais: os árabes muçulmanos em Curitiba (1945-1984)*, MA Thesis, Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, 2006, p. 118.

igraphy, and the *mihrab* made of Neo-Safavid styled tiles, with a bilingual inscription in Arabic and Portuguese stating: “Gift from the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1996”, expressed the connections between the community and Iran.

264 After a period of tensions between Sunni and Shi’i members of the community during the 1980s and 1990s, the *shaykh* and some other leading figures of the community started to reconcile quarreling factions by constructing a supra-sectarian Muslim identity based on doctrinal and ritual elements that were shared by both Sunnis and Shi’is. One of the pillars of this process of reintegration of local Sunni and Shi’i Muslims into a moral community, grounded on the religious space of the mosque of Curitiba while also keeping strong symbolic and practical transnational links to the Middle East, was the tendency to minimize the ritual and doctrinal boundaries between Sunnism and Shi’ism in tandem with an emphasis on the shared cultural references that shaped the religious practices of the adepts of both traditions.

Accordingly, Arabic was consecrated as the main linguistic context of both official (discourses, sermons, ritual formulae, etc.) and informal (ordinary conversations) intercourse within the community; concrete signs of sectarian differences between Sunni and Shi’i Muslims, such as the pieces of stone and wood or clay tablets made of the sacred soil of Karbala that the Shi’is use for touching their heads while praying, were removed to discrete locations in the back of the praying-hall of the mosque; and Sunnis and Shi’is were encouraged to mingle freely without

any particular order during prayers, in order to resignify their differences as individual idiosyncrasies in a shared performance of a collective ritual tradition. The leaders of the community developed discourses that stress the supra-sectarian pan-Islamic inclusiveness of the community. In 2010 the vice-president of the Muslim Charitable Society of Paraná explained to a group of visitors that “the mosque of Curitiba is the only religious place besides the Haram in Mekka where Sunni and Shi’is pray as equal members of the community”.²³ This same sentence was repeated on several other occasions by other members of the community, showing how successful were the efforts to overcome sectarian tensions and integrate the opposing groups into a moral community. This was done through the emphasis on shared ritual practices as well as incorporating values and practices from Middle-Eastern culture into the everyday life of the community. The result was a stable but inward-looking religious community which was resistant to the incorporation of new members who were not Arabic-speaking immigrants or their descendants.

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However, despite its success in overcoming internal conflicts, during 1970s and 1980s the Muslim community in Curitiba had to face a decline in religious practice among the generations born in Brazil. While the emphasis on Middle-Eastern cultural patterns of religious practice which were expressed in Arabic worked well to create

23. In the prayer-hall of the mosque there is a large picture of the *Haram* and the *Ka’ba*, giving a visual dimension of the symbolic link that the members of the community try to establish between the two mosques.

shared religious understandings and experiences among those who had the cultural and linguistic proficiency to fully participate in this process, it alienated many young Brazilian Muslims who, albeit of Middle-Eastern descent, had very limited knowledge of Arabic and Middle-Eastern cultural traditions, or who were exposed to other forms of living Islam, some of them coming from the Middle East itself.

266 The challenge posed by the decline in religious practice among the Brazilians of Muslim descent was dealt with in other communities, such as the one in Rio de Janeiro, by creating mechanisms to promote Islam in the larger Brazilian society and incorporate eventual converts into the community. However, there was a strong resistance within the Muslim community in Curitiba towards any efforts to attract converts from the non-Muslim Brazilian population.

In this context, some changes were implemented in the community. The main promoter of these changes was its current vice-president, who was born in Curitiba of Lebanese Shi'i parents and pursued incomplete religious studies in Qom, Iran. After returning to Curitiba, he decided to dedicate his time to reviving the religious life of the Muslim community. His efforts have the support of both the president of the Muslim Charitable Society and the current *shaykh* of the mosque, a Qom-educated Iranian of Iraqi descent.

Since 2005 the sermon (*khutba*) in the Friday prayer is accompanied by a summarized translation to Portuguese in order to allow those who cannot understand Arabic to

get its message. Since 2011 the participants in the Friday prayer also receive a printed translation of the sermon in Portuguese, which is also available on the webpage of the mosque.²⁴ Also in 2005, the mosque started to open regularly on Sunday mornings for visitors and tourists,²⁵ who would receive a tour of the building, the newsletter edited by the community, and basic explanations about Islam given by any member of the community who happened to be present. This opening of the mosque to visitation aimed to inscribe the Muslim community into the cultural landscape of Curitiba²⁶ in order to raise interest in Islam among non-Muslim Brazilian and, maybe more importantly, among people of Muslim descent who had become uninterested in religious practice or in the activities of the community. 267

The investment in the new generation of Muslims intensified in 2007 with the reopening of the Islamic school Escola Brasileira-Árabe (the Brazilian-Arab School), with 20 students on the elementary level. Also, in the same year courses for adults in Arabic, Islamic Culture and Islam started to be given at the mosque by the *shaykh* or the

24. <http://www.ibeipr.com.br>.

25. The mosque is located in the historical district of downtown Curitiba and every Sunday there is an antiques fair on the street in front of it that attracts a large crowd of visitors.

26. Curitiba has a strong urban identity as a cultured and Europeanized “model city” for Brazil. This claim is performatively expressed, negotiated and lived by its inhabitants in Curitiba’s planned urbanism, strong public expression of ethnic identities linked to the waves of European immigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a lively theater, music and museum scene.

vice-president of the society. The content of the courses is also available in Portuguese on the community webpage. As most of these changes were conceived and executed by Shi'i members of the community, Shi'ism became a more visible influence in the religious life of the community.

268 While most of the changes in the religious life of the community were made to keep the younger generations of Muslims interested in Islam, they also created a cultural environment more accommodating to the conversion to Islam of Brazilians without any Muslim ancestry. Thus, the small, but rising, number of converts to Islam²⁷ who are members of the Muslim community in Curitiba benefit from the structure of courses and bilingual speeches that were created in the last few years for the members of the community who were born in Brazil.

The need to transmit religious meanings, values and practices to a Muslim youth who is not proficient in the cultural traditions of the older generations of immigrants from the Middle East transformed even the religious practices of the community. The sermons have become more pedagogical in the last few years, explaining in detail all their moral points and making references to precise passages in the Qur'an or the Hadith, where the listeners can find further information. Informal ways of testing and inducing re-

27. Conversion to Shi'ism is not as widespread as to Sunni Islam, being still a very low-key phenomenon that is more important in São Paulo, where there is a Shi'i institution created by converts and led by an Iranian *shaykh*, the Imam 'Ali Cultural Center (Centro Cultural Imam 'Ali), which has around 50 members. In Curitiba there are fewer converts, who are integrated with the mosque. The other Shi'i communities, such as the one in Foz do Iguaçu, have a small number of women who converted through marriage.

ligious knowledge among the members of the community were developed, such as regular “quiz contests” about the suras (chapters) of the Qur’an. Those who scored the highest number of correct answers to 41 questions would gain a Qur’an or a book with Ali’s sermons, as well as the community’s general recognition of their religious knowledge.

In 2011 a quiz about the sura Al-Fatiha asked: “What does sura mean?”; “When is it allowed to not recite the sura Al-Fatiha?”; “How is Al-Fatiha different from the other suras?”; “Why do all Muslims start their activities with Bismillah?”; “Which sura does not begin with Bismillah?”; and so on. These quizzes produce a process of objectification of the religious tradition by bringing to scrutiny not only the religious knowledge as learned from the reading of the Qur’an, but also general habits and practices constructed as Islamic and their relation to the content of the sacred text. In this sense, they allow shifting the basis of Muslim identity from an inherited cultural tradition to an acquired religious knowledge that has both doctrinal/discursive and ritual/practical dimensions.

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Also, due to the new courses at the mosque and the increase in those seeking Islamic knowledge, both converts and “born-again” Muslims, there was a rise in the search for religious texts that could both explain the tenets of Islam and connect them to issues pertaining to the lives of the members of the community as well as to the context of contemporary society. As the process of Islamic education is led by the Shi’i members of the community, most texts have a Shi’i orientation, while the courses try to em-

phasize the common aspects between all traditions within Islam. Most texts are published by the Shi'i Islamic Center (Centro Islâmico) in São Paulo and range from a Portuguese version of the *Rajul Balagha*, the collection of Imam 'Ali's sermons, to Portuguese translations of central texts of contemporary Shi'i knowledge, such as *Iqtisadu-na* (Our Economy) and *Fasalfatu-na* (Our Philosophy), by Muhammad Bakir Sadr.

270 The use of the internet by the members of the community to search for other sources of Islamic knowledge is much less important than in the Muslim community in Rio de Janeiro. In this sense, there is a greater control of the sources of Islamic knowledge by the authorities of the Muslim Charitable Society, which implies a far greater importance, for the Muslim community in Curitiba, of classical references written by Middle-Eastern Islamic thinkers.

Therefore, the project of religious revivalism fostered in the Muslim community in Curitiba is centered on the construction of a tradition of knowledge in dialogue with classical sources of Islamic knowledge from the Middle East. Nevertheless, these references are appropriated and lived in discrete ways by the various members of the community, creating a plurality of identities and interpretation despite the religious authorities exerting greater control of the sources of Islamic knowledge that circulate in the Muslim community of Curitiba.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Muslim communities in Rio de Janeiro and Curitiba showed how Islam in Brazil is marked

by a plurality of identities, practices and forms of organization. The appropriation, interpretation and practice of the discrete Islamic traditions in the Muslim communities in Brazil is informed by the local social and cultural context of each one of them, as well as by the multiple connections that they establish with globalized and transnational Islamic discourses and practices. These processes happen in constant dialogue with the Islamic knowledge produced by religious leaders, Muslim intellectuals and average Muslims in the Middle East, Europe and North America, which circulates through printed and digital texts and is appropriated by the Muslims in Brazil. This constant reference to Islamic thinking allows Muslim identities in Brazil to creatively incorporate models and normative schemes that circulate in the global Islamic public sphere, producing a plurality of identities and forms of living Islam that are inscribed in both local and transnational religious spheres.

