

© 2010 Hasan Shahid

RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: A STUDY OF NEW MUSLIMS IN SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

BY

HASAN SHAHID

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Latin American Studies  
in the Graduate College of the  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010

Urbana, Illinois

Advisers:

Assistant Professor Antonio Luciano Tosta  
Assistant Professor Junaid Rana

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper will address questions of identity that male Muslim converts in São Paulo, Brazil face after adopting Islam. Specifically, it will analyze how they place their religion into notions of what it means to be Brazilian. Furthermore, this paper will show how many of these converts use Islam as a way to reconstruct their personal identities. Finally, it will argue that by becoming Muslims, they embrace a transnational religious identity. This paper will seek to show how conversion to Islam in São Paulo can significantly influence how individuals articulate notions of Brazilian national identity and belonging to the nation.

*To my family*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Countless people were responsible for making this project a success. I would like to thank all my professors for guiding me throughout the course of my graduate studies. Their advice and knowledge helped me formulate better research questions and design a more feasible project. Furthermore, I would like to thank all my friends in Brazil, who assisted me with my fieldwork endeavors and provided me with friendship and emotional support. Of course, my project would have never happened without them. Finally, I give many thanks all my friends and family in the United States and across the world as well as everyone else who has somehow positively impacted me throughout my life. I would not be who I am today without them.

This project was made possible by the generous funding provided by the Tinker Fellowship from the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the Brazil Initiation Scholarship from the Brazilian Studies Association. I must also acknowledge the United States Department of Education for graciously funding my graduate studies through multiple Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: The Place of Islam in Brazil .....	10
Chapter 2: Conversion as a Way to Reconstruct Identity .....	22
Chapter 3: A Transnational Muslim Identity .....	36
Chapter 4: The Future of Muslim Identity in Brazil .....	45
Bibliography .....	51

## **Introduction**

The number of people embracing Islam has increased in São Paulo since the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) in the United States, which resulted in countless news outlets throughout the world focusing more and more on Islam and its followers. Thus, in a quest to learn more about Islam and Muslims, many curious individuals have begun undertaking personal research. For some, this curiosity has led to religious conversion. Paradoxically, while Islamophobia has increased worldwide in the aftermath of 9/11, Islam in Brazil has seen growth since then. Although it occurred far beyond the borders of Brazil, 9/11 was a defining moment for the Muslims in the country because it spurred discussion on religious extremism and plurality, shed light on issues facing Muslims worldwide, and brought more attention to the local Muslim communities. As this shows, 9/11 has had an enormous impact on Islam throughout Brazil.

Muslims have lived in Brazil since at least the end of the eighteenth, when a large influx of African Muslims began to arrive as slaves (Reis 2003). However, the open practice of Islam among these newcomers and their descendants decreased significantly in the aftermath of the country's largest slave rebellion in 1835. While people of Arab origin form the majority of Brazil's Muslim population today, many non-Muslims from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds have chosen Islam as their religion in recent decades, especially after 9/11. These converts often find themselves in a position where they must reconcile their notions of Brazilian identity with Islam in order for them to relate their new religion with their day-to-day existence.

This paper will address the many questions of identity that male Muslim converts in the São Paulo metropolitan area face after adopting Islam. Chapter 1 will ask how these converts view their religion in relation to notions of Brazilianness. Specifically, I will analyze how they

place Islam within the cultural context of São Paulo and Brazil more generally and how they perceive its presence in the country. Chapter 2 will show how many converts in São Paulo use Islam as a way to reconstruct their personal identities. I will demonstrate this by describing how Afro-Brazilian converts embrace Islam as a way to restore a Muslim identity that their imagined ancestors may have once held and how relative isolation from other Muslims affects how converts shape their identity. Chapter 3 will show how becoming Muslim allows converts to embrace a transnational identity shared by many around the globe. By becoming Muslims, they begin to embrace a religious identity that supersedes notions of national identity. By studying this particular group of converts, I hope to show how conversion to Islam in São Paulo can significantly influence how individuals view notions of Brazilian national identity and belonging to the greater Brazilian nation.

São Paulo provides a unique field site found nowhere else in Brazil. The country's commercial and financial hub, it has a culturally diverse population that can trace its origins to many places throughout the world. This cosmopolitan mix is what many of the Muslims I met stated that allowed them to freely practice their religion. "Denis," a university student, discusses the effect the city's diversity on the Muslim community:

Here we have a Japanese neighborhood, a neighborhood of Jews, an Arab neighborhood. So in a big city it's easier to be Muslim here in Brazil here in São Paulo. But if you go to a city in the interior of Goiás... [for example] it must be more difficult. You see much more prejudice.<sup>1</sup>

By showing that various ethnic neighborhoods exist in São Paulo, Denis wants to show that Muslims are simply one of many communities in the city and that they can blend in well since

---

<sup>1</sup> Aqui a gente tem um bairro japonês, um bairro de judeus, um bairro árabe. Então em uma cidade grande é mais fácil ser muçulmano aqui no Brasil em São Paulo. Mas se você for para uma cidade no interior do Goiás... [por exemplo] deve ser muito mais difícil. Você encara muito mais preconceito.

they live among diverse groups of people. However, he argues that there would be more prejudice against Muslims in a small city in a less populous province like Goiás, presumably because of the less cosmopolitan atmosphere. Given São Paulo's unique position in Brazil, it would come as no surprise if the ways in which the city's Muslims form their identity differ significantly from those living elsewhere in the country, especially outside of the South and Southeast, which have historically drawn much of the immigrants to Brazil. Local context matters significantly—it would be inaccurate to portray identity formation as the same for Muslims across the globe. As Aitchison, Hopkins, and Kwan state, “Clearly, geography matters to the construction and contestation of Muslim identities, and this collection exemplifies this through a series of insights into specific local, regional and national contexts all of which emphasise the importance of place and time as significant influences over how Islam is experienced, lived out and practiced on an everyday basis” (7-8)

### Conversion vs. Reversion

The terms “*revertidos*” (reverts) and “*convertidos*” (converts) were both widely used among the Muslim community of São Paulo to refer to people who adopted Islam later in life. While both terms ultimately refer to a specific group of people, the use of each has profoundly different theological implications. By referring to people who adopt Islam as reverts, it is implied that they are returning to a previous state in which they were Muslims. Many Muslims believe that everyone is born a Muslim but that their religion changes due to their upbringing, education, and other social influences, an opinion held by “Yusuf”:

We understand that all people are born with a primordial nature, and this nature is submission to the Creator. And beginning with contact with the family and cultural medium you become a Christian, a Jew, a Zoroastrian, a Spiritist, or an atheist, you know what I mean? Or nothing—a

person who doesn't have any type of philosophical spiritual parameter. But this happens after birth and the upbringing of a child in a non-Islamic environment.<sup>2</sup>

He argues that all people are born with a primordial nature, which is submission to one God. This primordial nature, he implies, is Islam. Therefore, reversion, rather than conversion, allows people who become Muslim to return to a stage where they once had a natural inclination to worship God. They are reclaiming an identity and religion that they never had the chance to embrace. By believing that embracing Islam helps one return to a primordial state, it is implied that those who adopt the religion later in life reconstruct an identity that they once had. Unlike reversion, conversion implies that someone is adopting a religion that was never a part of their spiritual life. Thus, they are not returning to any previous state. The term "*convertido*" is used far more widely than "*revertido*," and the terms are often used interchangeably. Because of this, I use the word "convert" throughout this paper rather than "revert."

## Methodology

### Participant Observation

Participant observation played a vital role in my fieldwork because it gave me firsthand insight into the social dynamics of the Muslim community of São Paulo. As a qualitative research method, it allows the researcher to become immersed in the community that he or she is studying and allows him or her to become active members. Because of this, it is an excellent research tool for studying small, scattered populations that may be difficult to reach. As a

---

<sup>2</sup> Nós entendemos que todas pessoas nascem com natureza primordial e essa natureza é submissão ao criador. E a partir do contato com a família e com o meio cultural você se torna um cristão, um judeu, um zoroastrista, um espírita ou um ateu, entendeu? Ou nada—uma pessoa que não tem nenhum tipo de parâmetro filosófico espiritual. Mas isso acontece após do nascimento e crescimento duma criança num meio não islâmico.

newcomer to Brazil, participant observation allowed me to gain a comprehensive “overview” of the local Muslim community.

Participant observation at several of São Paulo’s mosques served as the basis of my research. First, it allowed me to observe various religious rituals and the discourses that revolved around them. Since I wanted to study identity, it was important for me to see how these rituals shaped notions of Muslim identity. Second, participant observation allowed me to observe the social interactions that occurred within the local Muslims’ primary places of worship. I was able to see how people interacted with one another and what these interactions signified. Third, participant observation gave me the opportunity to see how Islam became localized. Despite the increasing number of converts from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the majority of Muslims in the São Paulo area are of Lebanese origin, and because of this, I was interested in seeing how religious leaders and mosque attendees discussed the adaptation of the religion to fit local cultural conditions. As these examples show, participant observation gave me significant firsthand experience in observing the manifestation of Islam in the city.

### Interviews

This paper is based on interviews with eleven converts to Islam who lived in the São Paulo area during the time of my fieldwork. While nine of them were born and raised in the state of São Paulo, one grew up in the city of Rio de Janeiro but later relocated to the city of São Paulo. Another was raised in Lebanon and later migrated to the city. The eleven interviewees discussed in my paper self-identified as Muslim and came from families where at least one of the parents was nominally Catholic or Protestant. One convert said that although one of his parents was Muslim, he did not become Muslim until he was a teenager. My informants were all males,

and they ranged in age from their late teens to early sixties. They came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and held a number of occupations that ranged from university students to an English teacher to a filmmaker. In order to protect their identities, I use pseudonyms to refer to them throughout the paper. The people that I interviewed represent a diverse sample of male converts to Islam in São Paulo.

I recruited the interviewees using several means. First, they were recruited through the social networks that I developed at the local mosques. I informed the people that I met that I was conducting a study, and I asked individuals if they would be interested in participating. I recruited several people this way. Second, I utilized snowball sampling. A few of the people that I recruited for my interviews referred their friends to me, and this helped me gain more interviewees. These two methods yielded all of my recruits for the study. Third, I personally attempted to recruit individuals recommended by others through e-mails and phone calls. However, this method did not yield any recruits, as I did not receive any responses. Meeting people face-to-face and developing my networks over the weeks were essential to the success of my project.

The interviews, which lasted from 25 minutes to 2 hours, were semi-structured. Given that many of the interviews were essentially conversations, the discussions often diverged slightly from the original questions, as I let interviewees express themselves in ways in which they felt comfortable. I asked a series of predetermined questions (in Portuguese) asking about their journey to Islam and how they reconciled their religion with the local cultures. The interviews took place in a variety of spaces, including mosques, a café, an apartment, shopping centers, and the office of a Muslim organization. The interviewees were given the choice of where the interviews would take place, and it may be possible that the locations of the interviews

may have affected the discussions held and the answers I received. I quote from my interviewees throughout my paper, and all translations from Portuguese to English are my own—the original quotes can be found in the footnotes.

### Challenges

I had limited interaction with Muslim women throughout the course of my fieldwork for various reasons. First, the majority of people attending the mosques were men. Thus, my chances of interacting with men were much higher. Second, I did not have the opportunity to meet many women at the mosques, as the spaces were heavily gender-segregated. This prevented me from interacting with women and learning first-hand about their experiences. Third, I could not recruit female interviewees. I recruited most of the male interviewees through the social networks I developed, and since I made few female contacts, I had a smaller base from which to begin. Furthermore, attempts to contact Muslim women recommended by my male contacts were not successful. This may have been due to several factors, including a lack of interest in participating in such a study. Because of my limited of interaction with women, my project focused mainly on the experiences of men.

Another limitation of my study was its focus on Muslims who considered Islam an important part of their lives. Since I had to rely on meeting Muslims through the mosques, I tended to meet Muslims who considered themselves as actively practicing and who were actively involved in local Muslim community activities. Thus, their interpretation of Islam may have differed from Muslims who may not consider themselves as religious, however they define religiosity. Furthermore, they may relate their experiences as Muslims living in Brazil in a different manner.

A language barrier existed with some of the immigrants I met, especially with those were recent arrivals to Brazil. Arabic is a commonly used language in the Muslim community of São Paulo because the majority of Muslims are Arab immigrants and their descendants. Thus, many immigrants spoke it among themselves, and since I could not understand their conversations, I could not participate in them. Furthermore, speaking Arabic may have given me greater access to conversing with people who may have felt more comfortable speaking in their native language. Finally, the sermons at the Friday prayers at the mosques were generally in Arabic and were accompanied by translations either after or during the sermon (which were simultaneously broadcast through special headphones). By knowing Arabic, I would have understood the sermons in their original language rather than through seemingly rough translations. Having advanced proficiency in Arabic would have helped me significantly in my research.

### My Background

My experiences as an American Muslim of Bangladeshi descent living in the United States profoundly influenced my decision to carry out this study. As an ethnic minority who practiced a different religion and was “visibly different” from the vast majority of my elementary, middle school, and high school peers, I have always struggled to make sense of my identity. This self-analysis took off especially in the wake of 9/11 when I was a sophomore in high school. For the first time I was forced to confront a continuous barrage of anti-Muslim rhetoric coming from television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. Given that I always had considered myself as an American, I could not understand how I—a young Muslim male—was a threat not only to my own country and but somehow an entire civilization. Since then, I have sought to find out how particular groups of people become racialized over time and how people within these group internalize or reject this racialization. 9/11 significantly affected

Muslim communities worldwide, especially those in Europe and North America, and when I studied abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina as an undergraduate, I realized that it had significant repercussions for the communities there as well. My experiences there provided me with a strong desire to study the formation of Muslim identity in post-9/11 São Paulo.

## Chapter 1: The Place of Islam in Brazil

A strong belief in the plurality allowed by the multicultural character of Brazil's population exists among many of the Muslim converts I met. Although they acknowledged the dominance of Christianity in Brazil, many of them believed that the diversity of the country's people allowed for the insertion of Islam into notions of national identity to varying degrees. They argued that since the population derives from a wide variety of ethnic and national backgrounds, one cannot easily define the "typical" Brazilian. In a country that is home to people who have roots across the world, the task of defining a common national identity is quite a challenge. Yusuf argues that this very diversity has resulted in significant tolerance for Islam:

We don't exactly have a single origin. We were formed from various peoples. There are a lot of blacks here in Brazil. In the Southeast you find a lot of descendants of Arabs or Spaniards who brought a few [cultural] things from the Moors. Italians too... So there's a tolerance for Islam that's more open than in other countries. Truthfully, in Brazil there's a tolerance with whatever that everyone can be anything they want. No one is really worried about that. There isn't a national identity to put over another identity. When you put one over another identity what you have to have is your own previous identity. Brazilians don't have this previous identity. So it's a very cosmopolitan thing.<sup>3</sup>

By explaining that Brazil's people come from diverse origins, Yusuf holds the position that the cultural diversity that exists within the country easily allows for the inclusion of Islam. In other words, he believes that no overarching national identity exists because of the many types of people who have lived in Brazil throughout its history. Furthermore, he argues that there is more

---

<sup>3</sup> A gente não teve exatamente uma origem única. Fomos formados de vários povos. [...] Existem muitos negros aqui no Brasil. No Sudeste você encontra muitos descendentes de árabes ou de espanhóis que já trouxeram um pouco das coisas dos mouros. Italianos também... Então existe uma tolerância com o Islã que é mais aberto que em outros países. Na verdade no Brasil existe uma tolerância com qualquer coisa que todo mundo pode ser o que quiser... Ninguém está realmente preocupado com isso. Não existe uma identidade nacional para repor uma outra identidade. Quando você repõe outra identidade você tem que ter uma identidade anterior própria. O brasileiro não tem esta identidade anterior própria... Então é uma coisa extremamente cosmopolita.

tolerance for Islam in Brazil than in other countries because of this very diversity. Denis argues that Islam is compatible with Brazilian culture:

Islam is compatible with Brazilian culture... What's Brazilian culture? It's a combination of signs of ideologies and ways of thinking that the Brazilian people have had throughout our history, which is very recent. We only have about 500 years of history since discovery. If you analyzed it from the time of the monarchy to the republic it's a little more than 200. It's a young people.<sup>4</sup>

According to him, Brazilian culture is a mix of ideologies and ways of thinking that have developed relatively recently in history. This newness implies that it is still subject to change and is open to further influences. As a result, Islam can fit into existing notions of Brazilian culture. The view that Brazil's diversity allows for great flexibility in the acceptance of many types of people into the Brazilian mosaic starkly contrasts with the prevailing elite notions of Brazilian national identity of the past that idealized a whiter, more European Brazil. Thus, according to this argument, someone could define themselves as both Brazilian and Muslim without contradicting particular ideas of national identity.

### Shift to Multiculturalism

The policy of whitening—introduced in the aftermath of abolition in 1888—deemed who was an ideal citizen and who was not (Skidmore 2005). Because policymakers wanted to alter the image of Brazil to that of a more European country, it was in their interest to enact policies that favored the entrance of white Christian immigrants from Europe. In other words, a "white" Brazil was an ideal Brazil. Dark skin posed a threat to the elites in that it represented backwardness. White skin, to them, represented progress and modernity. Through these

---

<sup>4</sup> O Islã é compatível com cultura brasileira... O que é cultura brasileira? Ela é um agrupamento de signos de ideologias e pensamentos que o povo brasileiro teve ao longo da nossa história que é muito recente. Nós temos apenas 500 e poucos anos de história desde o descobrimento. Se você for analisar desde a monarquia até a república são pouco mais de 200. É um povo jovem.

immigration preferences, it was clear that white Christian immigrants from Europe would receive favorable treatment over other types of immigrants who entered Brazil in large numbers during this time period, such as Arabs and Japanese (Lesser, 1999). Because white immigrants were considered ideal, they could more easily assume a Brazilian identity and appear to contribute more to the nation. Other immigrants, such as the Japanese and Arabs, faced more difficulty in embracing a Brazilian identity and were perceived as more foreign because they were not considered the most desirable immigrants. The immigration policies of this time period stated which kind of people were desirable and which ones were not. Arab immigrants in general were considered culturally inferior and alien because of their perceived differences, and because most Muslim immigrants at this time were Arab, it is not difficult to imagine how they did not fit the characteristics of an ideal immigrant conceived by political and intellectual elites. Lesser says:

While 'whiteness' had always been a critical component of the definition of a desirable immigrant, by 1930 the definition of whiteness had increasingly narrowed to include those who were Christian, European and willing to settle in rural areas. Arabs and Jews, two groups that fell outside of the desirable categories were a particular challenge because, while not banned from entering Brazil, they were never expected to migrate there (Lesser 1998: 40)

Thus, according to Lesser, to be deemed white during this time period by policymakers required the possession of certain cultural characteristics, including identification with a particular religion—Christianity. This implies that Arab Muslims could not be considered as white because of their different religion and origins outside of Europe. Because of this, one could guess that they would be considered as less Brazilian than European Christians in the eyes of policymakers and other elites.

By the end of the 1930s, immigration to Brazil became highly selective under Getúlio Vargas' nationalist government. The ruling regime issued orders that at times excluded people from many parts of the world, including Jews, Catholics, Hindus, Muslims, Europeans, U.S. citizens, and Middle Easterners (Lesser 1994: 25). A nativist sentiment grew among segments of the urban working and middle class in Brazil, causing a shift in notions of national identity that was reflected in the changing immigration policy. Furthermore, the economic uncertainty catapulted by the Great Depression led to the perception of immigrants as competitors, promoting a tendency to shun supposedly foreign influences to produce an authentic Brazilian culture. A number of religious groups viewed as unassimilable were deemed undesirable for immigration in the midst of this paranoia. Considering that even the immigration of Catholics and Europeans was restricted, it is not difficult to imagine the place of Muslims in discussions among policymakers.

Today, most Muslims in Brazil are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine who arrived after the end of World War II. Unlike the immigrants arriving in previous waves, the new ones found themselves in a society that was quickly changing due to industrialization and urbanization (Filho 2007: 2-3). By the 1950s, industrialization became the principal method for modernization and economic growth, and, at the same time, migration from rural areas to cities increased significantly (Baer 2008: 49, 71). Agriculture no longer formed the backbone of the Brazilian economy. Thus, policymakers could not realistically expect new immigrants to work in the agricultural industry, as the number of jobs in other sectors of the economy was rapidly increasing. Like the earlier Lebanese and Syrian immigrants, most Arab Muslims settled in urban areas and engaged in commercial activities, easily adapting to the realities of the changing economy. They fit the new image of Brazil as a

rapidly industrializing country no longer reliant on the export of primary products. Rather than contradict notions of the ideal immigrant, the more current waves of Arab Muslims are desirable in the sense that they participate directly in the capitalist economy.

Although Brazilian state policy today does not explicitly promote Muslim immigration, it certainly makes it much easier than in the past since it no longer seeks to whiten the country through selective policies. John Karam argues that while state immigration experts criticized Christian Syrian-Lebanese immigrants for their tendency to seek spouses in their homelands and for not intermarrying with others, Lebanese Muslims today have greater freedom in marrying in Lebanon and returning with their spouses to Brazil in the name of family reunification (95-6). Previously, in nationalist thinking, the ideal Brazilian was "mixed," but this idea was removed from state immigration policy in the late twentieth century.

Until the 1970s, ideologues hoped non-European immigrants would practice exogamy by mixing with native-born Brazilians (Karam 2007: 96). However, in 1980-1, immigration policy underwent a significant shift and removed references to racial mixture. Instead, it was "given the primary task of regulating the flow of people for 'economic productivity.'" This change shows a clear difference from previous notions of what the purpose of immigration should be. Rather than promoting immigration as a means to whiten the population, policy now hails immigration as a means of improving the economy. [Although elites promoted European immigration to provide a steady source of labor on coffee plantations in the wake of abolition, the whitening component was an undeniably important part of this project (Skidmore 2005: 136-8).] The removal of references to racial mixture from immigration policy allows, from the official perspective, Muslims to maintain their cultural traditions and to marry among themselves as long as they prove beneficial to the economy.

## Tolerance for Islam?

While many of the converts I met believed that Islam was compatible with Brazilian culture, some argued that the religion conflicted with many aspects of it. The people who held this view believed that the practice of Islam was incompatible with the lifestyles of most Brazilians. “Abdallah,” a recent university graduate, gives the following perspective:

Me: Do you think Islam is compatible with Brazilian culture?

Abdallah: Definitely not in many ways. Like I said, it's part of the culture of normal Brazilians. I'm not talking about deprived Brazilians, lost Brazilians, Brazilians socially astray--normal Brazilians. It's normal to drink beer, among other things. It's normal for Brazilian guys to go out with women. It's normal for Brazilian women to go to the night club to dance and have fun. It's normal for Brazilians to eat pork at barbeques. And all of these things are incompatible with what Islam teaches. So there's a shock, and this shock is something that when you convert, you feel it a little until you get a hang of things. It was like that with the Arab people. The Arab people during the time of the message's revelation also liked to drink a lot. So the ban against drinking came slowly. It came little by little so that a person could transform himself. The convert is like that too. He changes the small things. It's a painful process. But in many ways Brazilian culture is incompatible with Islamic culture.<sup>5</sup>

Abdallah believes that the “average” Brazilian engaged in activities that conflicted with the values of Islam. If most Brazilians did not live Islamically-acceptable lifestyles, how could they integrate Islam into their culture? Abdallah, through his example of the conversion of the Arab

---

<sup>5</sup> Eu: Você acha que o Islam é compatível com a cultura brasileira?

Abdallah: Com certeza em muitos aspectos, não. Porque como eu falei, faz parte da cultura do brasileiro normal. Não estou falando do brasileiro depravado, brasileiro perdido, brasileiro socialmente descaminhado—brasileiro normal. É normal beber cerveja, entre outras coisas. É normal pra o brasileiro sair com mulheres. É normal pra a brasileira ir pra o clube noturno para dançar e se-divertir. É normal pra o brasileiro comer carne de porco no churrasco. E todos esses são coisas incompatíveis com o que Islam ensina. Então existe um choque e esse choque é uma coisa que quando você se converte, você sente ele um pouco e demora até você consegue um processo. Assim como foi com o povo arabe. O povo árabe na época de revelação da mensagem também gostava muito de bebida. Então a proibição da bebida foi vindo paulatinamente. Foi vindo pouco a pouco para que a pessoa pudesse se transformar. O convertido é assim também. Ele muda os poucos. É um processo doloroso. Mas em muitos aspectos a cultura brasileira é incompatível com a cultura islâmica.

people, implies that values of non-Muslims in Brazil could change over time if they adopted Islam, although the process of giving up activities such as drinking could be difficult. Thus, his story implies that the lifestyles of a people could potentially change. Nonetheless, for some converts like Abdallah, Brazilian culture, as a whole, is intrinsically linked to the practice of un-Islamic activities. “Isa,” a young man in his late teens, takes a similar yet different viewpoint regarding the compatibility of Brazilian culture and Islam:

Me: Is it easy to be Muslim and Brazilian at the same time?

Isa: There are a few habits we change, right? Like about touching between a man and a woman. Sometimes the way of conversing with someone of another religion because a conflict could happen since there's disagreement. And these types of things, right? Being Brazilian and being Muslim aren't much different because both have a big heart.

Me: So you think Islam is compatible with Brazilian culture?

Isa: No. Compatible with the culture? No. But the personality of these people living? Yes. But the culture of these people? No. They're completely different.

Me: Why?

Isa: Because Islamic culture involves putting in people the practice of monotheism—worshipping one god—while other religions involve a trinity, which is polytheism—worshipping more than one god. It's something that doesn't fly.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Eu: É fácil ser muçulmano e brasileiro ao mesmo tempo?

Isa: Tem certos hábitos que a gente muda, né? Como em relação ao toque [entre] um homem e uma mulher. Às vezes o modo de conversar com uma pessoa de outra religião porque pode sair um conflito porque há discordância. E essas coisas, né? Ser brasileiro e ser muçulmano não tem muita diferença porque os dois têm um coração enorme.

Eu: Então você acha que o Islam é compatível com a cultura brasileira?

Isa: Não. Compatível com a cultura? Não. Mas as personalidades das pessoas que vivem, sim. Mas a cultura dessas pessoas? Não. São totalmente diferente.

Eu: Por quê?

Isa: Porque a cultura islâmica implica colocar nas pessoas a prática de monoteísmo—adorar o Deus único—enquanto as outras religiões implicam uma trindade que é politeísmo—adorar mais de um deus. É uma coisa que não bate.

He argues that while it is possible to both Brazilian and Muslim, Islam is not compatible with Brazilian culture. For him, there is a clear difference between the personalities of people and their values. While a non-Muslim Brazilian may have a similar personality to that of a Muslim, the former's culture clashes with Islamic teachings. The converts who hold similar viewpoints to those held by Abdallah and Isa appear to define Brazilian culture as a singular entity rather than one made up of various cultures and lifestyles. Given the sheer geographical size of Brazil and the many types of people who live within it, it seems unrealistic to describe a single overarching culture in the country.

Some of the converts I encountered believed that Islam was compatible with Brazilian culture because of its historical links to Brazil. Rather than look at the religion as completely foreign to their land, they decided to look at how Islam has influenced certain aspects of Brazilian culture and society. "José," a university student, discusses how he believes Islam his links to Brazil's distant and more recent past:

Me: Is Islam compatible with Brazilian culture?

José: Depending on the place, yes. In some parts of Brazil, like in the Northeast, you have a very strong tradition with the African religions. In these places, historically, there was also an Islamic influence from slaves. There was a slave revolt in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that was the Malê Revolt. Brazil is a country with very large cultural miscegenation. So you can observe many things of Islam on top of Brazilian culture [...] In some places in Brazil you have a very, very strong Arab influence and a Catholic influence from the time of Brazil's discovery in which both Portugal and Spain already had an influence of Moors, Arabs, and Islam.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Eu: O Islã é compatível com a cultura brasileira?

José: Dependendo do lugar, sim. Em alguns lugares no Brasil, como no Nordeste, você tem uma tradição muito forte com as religiões africanas. Nestes lugares historicamente também teve uma influência islâmica de escravos. Teve uma revolta de escravos no século XVIII que foi a Revolta dos Malês. O Brasil é um país com uma miscegenação cultural muito grande. Então dá pra você observe muita coisa do Islã por acima da cultura brasileira. [...] Em alguns

He sees the presence of African Muslim slaves and the Malê Revolt (which I will discuss in the next chapter) as one indicator of Islam's compatibility with Brazilian culture. While he does not argue that the religion of these slaves had a strong influence on other people, he does say that there is “very large cultural miscegenation” in Brazil, which suggests that some aspects of the culture of Muslim slaves mixed with the cultures of others. He also says that there is a very strong Arab and Muslim influence that came with the earliest Portuguese settlers, who came from a land once dominated by the Moors. Converts such as José take a less superficial approach in defining compatibility by looking at the historical presence of Islam in Brazil.

### Portrayals of Muslims in the Brazilian Media

Many of the Muslims—both converts and those raised as Muslims—that I met in São Paulo believed that news coverage of Muslims engaging in violence throughout the world was the biggest obstacle to the acceptance of Islam in Brazil. Many of the Muslims I encountered in São Paulo criticized the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims on Brazilian television news reports, newspapers, and magazines, which they frequently attributed to the influence of the U.S. media. José states the following:

We end up consuming a lot of media from abroad. Usually Brazilian newspapers use newspapers from abroad. They use [*The*] *Washington Post*. They use [*The*] *New York Times* or *The Guardian*. They use *Le Monde*. They use newspapers [from abroad] to base materials. [...] These [Brazilian] newspapers end up using discussions that don't have to do with us, you know what I mean? They

---

lugares no Brasil você tem uma influência árabe muito, muito forte e também uma influência católica da época do descobrimento do Brasil que foi uma época em que tanto Portugal quanto Espanha ainda tinha influência dos mouros, árabes e Islã.

end up translating a translation that's not merited. This goes on creating stereotypes and images that make Islam look like a sick religion.<sup>8</sup>

In his statement, he argues that U.S. newspapers, as well as those from the United Kingdom and France, provide the primary source of information on articles written for Brazilian media regarding Muslims and Islam. Brazilian newspapers, in his view, write stories about Muslims and their faith using information written by biased sources from abroad. Essentially, they recycle information rather than providing their own viewpoints, which José believes produces negative stereotypes about Islam. Gianpaolo Baiocchi notes that Brazilian television stations simply rebroadcasted images from CNN with only occasional voiceover commentary and no translation to Portuguese in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11 (184). This shows that Brazilians viewed the same exact broadcasts as Americans, albeit in a less informative form. “João” echoes José’s view that foreign media (from the U.S., in this case) shapes how Brazilian’s perceives Islam and its practitioners:

Me: What does it mean to be Muslim in Brazil?

João: I think it's something different from what we're normally used to seeing in Brazil. It's very different, and it's difficult for people to accept it because we have a very Western outlook because of all the things we're exposed to. Mainly the United States sends us a lot of messages from their point of view—not, in reality, Islam. If you ask some Brazilian, he's going to think Muslims are terrorists. It's not really that. But the Brazilian people aren't to blame for this because the United States imposes many things. I think it's very strong imperialism.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> A gente acaba consumindo muita mídia da fora. Geralmente os jornais brasileiros usam jornais da fora. Usam [*The*] *Washington Post*. Usam [*The*] *New York Times* ou *The Guardian*. Usam *Le Monde*. Usam jornais [da fora] para basear matérias. [...] Esses jornais [brasileiros] acabam usando discussões que não acabam em nós, entendeu? Eles acabam traduzindo uma tradução que não é devida. Isso vai criando estereótipos e imagens que façam que o Islã seja uma religião enferma.

<sup>9</sup> Eu: O que significa ser muçulmano no Brasil?

João: Eu acho que é uma coisa diferente do normal que a gente está acostumada a ver no Brasil. É muito diferente e é difícil as pessoas aceitar porque a gente tem muita visão ocidental porque todas as coisas passam pra a gente.

Rather than blaming Brazilians for creating the image of Muslims as terrorists, he traces the source for this type of stereotyping to the U.S—a sentiment I encountered often during my fieldwork. Similarly, Silvia Montenegro argues that the media is one of the most important agents that create the image of the Muslim in Brazil (64). The Muslims I met in São Paulo frequently mentioned this while commenting that the media rather than Muslims themselves had more power in defining Islam and its followers. Thus, they implied that they had limited agency portraying a more accurate description of their religion and culture to non-Muslims in Brazil, which they believed they needed to overcome.

Muslims in Brazil constantly face a barrage of negative portrayals of Muslims in the media, as reports of bombings and images of stern bearded men and headscarf-clad women dominate. Because unflattering stories about Muslims appear far more frequently than not, Muslims in Brazil are forced to deal with challenging the negative ideas of Islam promoted by various news sources. Given their small population size and lack of adequate representation in positions of power, it is difficult for them to promote a more positive and accurate view of their cultures. Many of the Muslims I met said that the popular representations of Muslims in the media do not accurately reflect the majority of Muslims, whom they argue are overwhelmingly against extremism and violence. Since the image of Muslims as violent extremists dominates, many of the Muslims I met believed that Muslims must personally challenge prevailing views by teaching others about the true meanings of Islam. Although they might not be able to change how Muslims are presented in the media, they believed that they could try changing views on a

---

Principalmente os Estados Unidos passam muita mensagem para a gente o ponto de vista deles—não, na verdade, o Islã. Se você pergunta para algum brasileiro, vai achar que muçulmano é terrorista. Na verdade não é isso. Mas o povo brasileiro não tem culpa disso porque muitas coisas os Estados Unidos impõem. Eu acho imperialismo muito forte.

much smaller scale. By attempting to correct the negative portrayal of Muslims, they are reaffirming their own identities as peaceful moderates.

## **Chapter 2: Conversion as a Way to Reconstruct Identity**

Many of the converts I interviewed said that they converted to Islam after a search for religion. Interestingly, many of them had adopted several religions before deciding on Islam. Why this search? According to them, they were looking for a particular truth, and they questioned the religious beliefs (or lack thereof) they were exposed to while growing up. I noticed a question of identity that involved the soul. Given that no one (presumably) pressured them to abandon their former religious identities and convert to Islam, it is clear that they adopted a new identity because of their desires. Their adoption of a Muslim identity was a creation of their own. This is important because this type of conversion allows one to choose his or her own identity rather than to simply follow the identities ascribed to him or her. This gives people more agency in determining who they are, and this gives people the ability to construct and reconstruct identities.

There has been a large movement of people leaving the Catholic church and converting to Protestant churches in Brazil since the twentieth century (Chesnut 2003; Corten 1999; Garrard-Burnett and Stoll 1993; Mariz 1994; Martin 1990; Stoll 1990). Interestingly, a number of the converts I met said they had joined at least one Protestant church before converting to Islam. In fact, many of them viewed the proselytism of these churches as a form of “competition.” Many converts compared their efforts to the proselytism of Evangelicals. One told me that Evangelicals take much more effort to reach out to the greater public to spread their religion than Muslims. This form of competition interested me in that it seemed like a form of marketing to promote one religion over another as a way to save peoples’ souls.

Conversion to Islam continues throughout a convert's lifetime, as he or she must reconcile his or her beliefs with those of the religion. Oftentimes, these beliefs conflict with the

values promoted by Islam, and because of this, the convert may need to decide which ones are compatible and which ones are not. Conversion may be a difficult process for some, and as a result time may be needed for a convert to feel more comfortable being a Muslim. Karin van Nieuwkerk says that:

Conversion does not stop at the moment of embracing Islam, and it is not solely a mental activity of accepting a new belief. It requires embodiment of new social and religious practices. Within this process of embodiment and learning new practices, new ideas and insights are created that can generate new discourses and receptivity to other voices of Islamic discourse. In different periods of converts' lives, a revised or novel discourse can make sense (11).

In this she says that conversion is not an instant process. Rather, it is a continuous one that adapts to the reality of the converts' circumstances, and they may interpret Islam differently at different stages of their life. Thus, being a Muslim may carry different meanings for converts at different points of their lives. The experiences that converts have over time may affect how they interpret Islam and view religion more generally.

The ways in which these converts reconstructed their identities varied widely, and these often depended on their own personal backgrounds and experiences. This chapter will discuss the ways of how converting to Islam allows for Afro-Brazilians to reconcile their racial politics, how converts reconcile their religious beliefs with those of Arab Muslims, and how converts use conversion to Islam as a way to portray themselves in new ways.

### Afro-Brazilians and Conversion

The first Muslims to arrive in Brazil in large numbers were slaves brought from West Africa. Known as Malês, they came from various regions and spoke a number of languages. Despite these differences, a common religion helped bind them, and it was this unity that helped

them revolt against white rule in Salvador, Bahia in 1835 (Lovejoy 2000: 31). Until that point, authorities had tolerated Islam among blacks, both freed and enslaved. However, they began to repress the practice of both Islam and Candomblé in the aftermath of the rebellion by arresting the owners of objects linked to these faiths (Reis 2003: 430). Furthermore, a law requiring slave masters to teach slaves about Christianity and to baptize them was passed (1830). These efforts were meant to weaken not only the African Muslim community but the black community more broadly. Although a minority, Muslims formed fifteen to twenty percent of Africans in Salvador at the time. For some Afro-Brazilian converts in São Paulo, this history of Islam among Africans forcefully brought to Brazil served as one of the reasons they chose to adopt the religion. This conversion, in their view, allows them to gain a better sense of their roots and to reconstruct an identity that was stripped from their ancestors.

Islam was an influential force in shaping notions of religious identity among Afro-Brazilians in Bahia at the time of the Malê Revolt. “Muhammad,” a man who grew up in the periphery of São Paulo and who describes himself as an Afro-Brazilian, argued that Islam had a closer relationship with his personal history than Christianity:

The Malê Revolt served to increase my belief and understanding that my link with Islam is much larger than my link to Christianity. Christianity is a religion that was coming from abroad that was imposed on the blacks that were captured in Africa. Not Islam. Islam shares space with animist and African religions. But Islam is much closer to my reality than Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

In this quote, Muhammad asserts that the Malê Revolt helped him understand how Islam was much more closely linked to the Afro-Brazilian community than Christianity, a religion he believes is a foreign one imposed on Brazilians of African descent. According to him, Islam,

---

<sup>10</sup> A Revolta dos Malês serviu para aumentar a minha crença e o meu entendimento que a minha ligação com o Islã é muito maior do que a minha ligação com cristianismo. O cristianismo é uma religião que vinha de fora que foi imposto aos negros que foram capturados d’África. O islamismo, não. O islamismo divide espaço com as religiões animistas e africanas. Mas o islamismo está muito mais próximo da minha verdade do que o cristianismo.

along with animist African religions, has a closer relationship to the Afro-Brazilian experience. Thus, by converting to Islam, Muhammad is constructing an identity that his ancestors may have once had.

Similarly, converting to Islam is seen by some Afro-Brazilians as a way to reconstruct an identity that was stripped from their ancestors. Muhammad further explains how he felt about his personal identity before embracing the religion:

Islam arrived in Brazil with slaves and was forcefully taken from our culture by the imposition of a new Christian religion. [...] I was born without knowing who I was. I was boring without knowing my real identity. I was raised without knowing my real identity. So Islam began to fade away from me, which always existed within me.<sup>11</sup>

He says that before becoming Muslim, he had a weak sense of identity. Because his ancestors were forced to convert to Christianity, they lost aspects of their own culture. This, he implies, was a way to remove their identities from them. He argues that Islam always existed in him but that it revealed itself later in his life when he became a Muslim. Or rather, he believes that he had a latent Muslim identity within him that came as a result of his ancestors.

A notion among some Afro-Brazilian converts I met was that Islam elevated the position of blacks both socially and economically. Muhammad says:

Many black Muslims, when they revert to Islam, end up bettering their self-esteem. [...] Many black Muslims end up ascending [socially and economically] even better than his own companions—also black—that didn't have access to the knowledge of Islam. Islam is not only an ideology. It's much stronger when you notice that information will give you your freedom. And there the Muslim—whether he's black or of another ethnicity—starts to find this in all fields. He

---

<sup>11</sup> O islamismo chegou no Brasil com os escravos e forçosamente foi retirado da nossa cultura por imposição de uma nova religião cristã. [...] Eu nasci sem saber quem eu era. Eu nasci sem conhecer minha real identidade. Eu cresci sem conhecer minha real identidade. Então eu passei a sumir o islamismo, que sempre existiu em mim...

starts to find knowledge in physics, in mathematics, in anthropology, in the social sciences, in whatever.<sup>12</sup>

Here he claims that converts—both blacks and non-blacks—raise their self-esteem by converting to Islam. Presumably, he means they do this by gaining knowledge. Muhammad began seeking a college degree when he was well into his 30s, after he converted to Islam. Furthermore, he argues that Muslims begin a search for knowledge that allows them to raise their position in society. By gaining an education, in his view, people gain their liberty—a point that should be noted because of his belief that many Afro-Brazilians live a marginal existence. In her study on how certain segments of the poor in Brazil cope with poverty by joining Pentecostal churches, Cecília Loreto Mariz argues that religious conversion gives converts the opportunity to "rationalize" their spirituality, which may ultimately help with deal with material survival:

When the Brazilian poor go to a Pentecostal church, they are not looking for an enchanted religion with magic, miracles, and emotion, as perhaps middle-class people do, because they already have had magic, miracles, and emotion in their previous religions. It seems that the relative rationalization of the Pentecostal worldview is most appealing for the poor. Although it does not imply that emotion, magical elements, and rituals are decreasing or being suppressed, Pentecostalism is still rationalizing, since it introduces a universal ethic and stresses individual choice of religion, exclusivity of religious identity, and the construction of a theoretical system that integrates religious beliefs. This trend is related to the industrialization and modernization of Brazilian society, which has become increasingly global in its values and attitudes. But it also reflects the reaction of the poor, who are trying to control these changes and create a better life for themselves and their families (8).

---

<sup>12</sup> Muitos muçulmanos negros, quando se revertem ao Islamismo, acabam melhorando seu auto-estima. [...] Muitos muçulmanos negros acabam ascendendo [socialmente e economicamente] até melhor do aquele companheiro dele—negro também—que não teve acesso ao conhecimento do Islã. O Islã não é só uma ideologia. É muito mais forte quando você percebe que na informação é que vai dar sua liberdade. E aí o muçulmano—seja ele é negro ou de qualquer etnicidade—começa buscar este conhecimento em todos os campos. Ele começa buscar conhecimento na física, na matemática, na antropologia, nas ciências sociais, enfim.

As this show, conversion to Pentecostalism among the Brazilian poor, who are disproportionately of African descent, allows converts to embody new worldviews to help them cope with their poverty—a view that meshes closely with Muhammad's belief that Brazilians who convert to Islam begin a search for knowledge that ultimately helps them to ascend financially and socially. Thus, Islam is seen by many converts as a way to cope with the economic reality in which they live. Although they may not have the strength to challenge existing power structures, they do have the ability to change their individual circumstances to a certain extent by adopting a new religion. However, while statistical data suggests that conversion to Pentecostalism in Brazil increases along with the impoverishment of the population, it is uncertain if this holds true for conversion to Islam as well (Corten, 1995: 104-105).

Anthropologist Stephen Selka argues that in Brazil in the 1970s antiracist activists "became centrally concerned with what it means to be Afro-Brazilian not simply as a cultural issue but for the practical purposes of social mobilization" (12). Candomblé terreiros became important places in the black movement that originated in Salvador, Bahia—widely considered the center of Afro-Brazilian culture in Brazil—in the 1970s and 1980s. Many activists believed that African-derived religion formed the basis "for a shared ethnoreligious and sociopolitical identity" (12). Conservative Catholics along with evangelicals—who are mainly of African descent in Bahia—have typically opposed the use of Candomblé as a shared Afro-Brazilian religion (13). It appears that Afro-Brazilian Muslims like Muhammad see Islam as an African religion that has the ability to unite people of African descent in Brazil and to raise their social status. By doing so, they are reshaping notions of blackness, which Livio Sansone describes as:

not a racial category fixed in some biological difference, but both a racial and an ethnic identity that can be based on a variety of factors: the management of black physical appearance; the use of

cultural traits associated with Afro-Brazilian tradition (particularly in religion, music, and cuisine); status; or the combination of these factors (12).

By using this definition of blackness, one can argue that Islam is an Afro-Brazilian religion due to its history among blacks in Brazil. Thus, converting to Islam allows Afro-Brazilian converts to rearticulate notions of blackness by allowing them to rescue aspects of their ancestral culture.

The notion that converting to Islam would bring people of African descent closer to their roots shares similarities with the rise of the Nation of Islam during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and it was obvious that the Nation of Islam and its most well-known figure, Malcolm X, has had a large influence in bringing at least some Afro-Brazilians to Islam. In his study of the Nation of Islam from 1960 to 1975, Edward E. Curtis IV says that in the 1960s many members of the group looked toward not only Africa for shaping notions of African American identity but to the Islamic world more generally:

These African Americans [members of the Nation of Islam who disagreed with advocates of the black consciousness movement] began to map their identities with a view not only toward Africa but also toward the Islamic world, toward any place where Muslims had been, including Asia, the Middle East, and even Latin America. They looked beyond the transatlantic world to form their communal identities and created black history narratives that linked the history of black people to this history of Islam. Their cognitive map went well beyond the boundaries of what has been called the black Atlantic. African American Muslims were not simply creating nationalist identities in the 1960s and 1970s; they were also creating transnational identities. They felt allegiance not only to the black nation but also a community of Muslims who might be members of several different nations. If one wants to understand why some African Americans are attracted today to various transnational movements like the Salafiyya and various Sufi or mystical orders, one has to understand this pivotal moment, this reorientation of black Americans toward the Islamic world and Muslim religionists (Curtis 2006: 9).

Thus, Islam was an influential force in shaping notions of African American identity for many members of the Nation of Islam during the black consciousness movement, and the Nation of Islam was instrumental in introducing Islam to thousands of African Americans. Now this notion has been carried to Brazil to the Afro-Brazilian populations. While the converts I interviewed said that converting to Islam helped them become closer to their African roots, they also took pride that Islam connected them to diverse groups of people across the world.

Why are some Afro-Brazilians attracted to Islam? It appears that one reason is that conversion allows them the freedom to redefine themselves to make better sense of their position in society. The slave trade and the restrictions of slavery forced Africans to give up many aspects of their native cultures, and an awareness of this has caused some Afro-Brazilians to go on a search for their identity to reconstruct what their ancestors lost. In his study of African American Muslim social history in Newark, New Jersey, Michael Nash asks why African Americans have been attracted to Islam, suggesting that “the consensus among Muslim American leaders is that Islam, and what it has to offer for shaping and re-shaping adherents, has been successful in filling a spiritual void in the individual and collective lives of African Americans” (14). While Nash does not discuss the situation of Afro-Brazilian Muslims, I would suggest those whom I interviewed reflected the notion that Islam fills a spiritual void in them, as their ancestors' religions were stripped from them centuries ago. By converting to Islam, they were able to better make sense of their lives and situations.

#### Personal Development of Muslim Identity

The vast majority of the converts I met were the only Muslims in their families. Because of this, they often felt a deep disconnect between their own spiritual lives and that of their relatives. Unlike those who lived with and came from Muslim families, these converts rarely

encountered Muslims in their day-to-day lives—their only physical interaction with Muslims would be in one of the city’s mosques once or twice a week. Abdallah explains this situation through the lens of his own experiences:

The guy that’s a revert here in Brazil is like a lone star because in his day-to-day life he doesn’t have contact with other Muslims. At work he doesn’t have contact with Muslims. The mosque is far away from his house. [...] So the revert stays very lonely. He has a lot of persistence to manage following the religion.<sup>13</sup>

He asserts that converts feel a strong sense of loneliness due to their isolation from the Muslim community. Because they have little interaction with Muslims, it is more difficult for these converts to learn more about their religion and to share their experiences with those with whom they can relate. Furthermore, this isolation makes it more difficult for them to practice Islam, as they may feel that an environment more conducive to their religion would make it easier.

Abdallah also adds that practicing Islam is difficult for converts:

The Brazilian who manages to follow Islam is a victorious person because there are many difficulties. The community is small. The guy doesn’t really live with Muslims day-to-day. He only complies with Islam because Allah is watching him—no other Muslim is watching him the whole week.<sup>14</sup>

Given the challenges of practicing Islam in Brazil, the small size of the Muslim community, and the lack of daily interaction with Muslims, he argues that someone who is able to follow the religion is “very victorious,” which implies that although Muslims can practice their religion with few barriers, it is difficult to do so because of the environment. Abdallah also argues that

---

<sup>13</sup> O cara que é revertido aqui no Brasil é como una estrela solitária porque no dia-dia dele ele não tem contato com outros muçulmanos. No trabalho ele não tem contato com muçulmano. A mesquita é longe da casa dele. [...] Então o revertido fica muito sozinho. Tem muito persistência para conseguir seguir a religião.

<sup>14</sup> O brasileiro que consegue seguir o Islã é uma pessoa muito vitorioso porque as dificuldades são muitas. A comunidade é pequena. O cara realmente não convive com muçulmanos no dia-dia. Ele só cumpre o Islã porque Allah ta vendo ele--nenhum outro muçulmano ta vendo ele na semana inteira.

converts follow Islam only because God is watching them. After all, if they do not see other Muslims the entire week, what other reason would they have? As these examples show, the construction of a Muslim identity for these converts is often very much a truly personal experience.

Many of the Muslims I met throughout the course of my fieldwork said that practicing Islam in Brazil was difficult not because of any legal or cultural restrictions on the religion but because of the temptations that existed in the day-to-day lives of Muslims. While they are given freedom to practice their religion, they are also given the freedom to follow it loosely or abandon it completely. “Ali,” a convert in his early 30s, provides valuable insight into what it means to be a Muslim in Brazil:

Ali: Being a Muslim in Brazil is a constant struggle.

Me: Why?

Ali: Because you're not in a Muslim environment. You have various temptations. You're subject to sin all day. It's very complicated to be Muslim in Brazil. To be a Muslim in Brazil is to be a warrior.

Me: Do you think there are benefits to being Muslim in Brazil?

Ali: Many, many. I think that being Muslim in Brazil has more award than in other countries.

Me: Because it's more difficult to practice here?

Ali: Yes. For the difficulty of practicing in [this] environment. In certain countries that you go to, on each block there is a mosque. Not in Brazil. In Brazil it's very difficult.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Ali: Ser muçulmano no Brasil é uma luta constante.

Eu: Por quê?

Ali: Porque você não está no ambiente muçulmano. Você tem várias tentações. Você está sujeito ao pecado todo dia. É muito complicado ser muçulmano no Brasil. Ser muçulmano no Brasil é ser um guerreiro.

Eu: Você acha que tem benefícios de ser muçulmano no Brasil?

Ali: Muitos, muitos. Eu tenho comigo que ser muçulmano no Brasil tem mais recompensa do que outros países.

In this conversation Ali asserts that being a Muslim in Brazil is a “constant struggle” because of the temptations and sin Muslims are exposed to everyday. For someone who believes Islam implicates a strictly regimented lifestyle, living in such an atmosphere poses a major challenge to the practice of his faith. Interestingly, he tries to make sense of this difficulty by arguing that Muslims living in Brazil will receive greater reward [from God] because of the hardships of practicing Islam in such a country. Converts who hold views like Ali's look at their position not as a burden but more as a challenge to test their faith. This, I would argue, gives them the strength to continue following their religion.

Considering that most of the converts I encountered had little to no interaction with Muslims outside of their visits to mosques, to what extent is the creation of a Muslim identity left to them? It is likely that their experiences of being one of the few Muslims in their families profoundly affect their sense of identity. Unlike people born into Muslim families, they cannot retreat to a space where others can relate to their experiences as Muslims in their times away from mosques. Thus, this difference in religious beliefs between converts and their relatives helps to reinforce a greater sense of Muslim identity, especially among the converts who hold their religion to great importance. Furthermore, this relative isolation from the Muslim community seems to suggest that converts follow Islam because of their own religious convictions rather than pressure from other Muslims, suggesting that their adoption of a Muslim identity is certainly a personal choice. The status of converts as a minority within a religious minority clearly has large implications on the development of their personal identities.

---

Eu: Por que é mais difícil praticar aqui?

Ali: Sim, pela dificuldade praticar no ambiente. Em certos países que você vai, em cada esquina tem uma mesquita. No Brasil, não. No Brasil é muito difícil.

### Converts and Arab Muslims

A distinction between “Brazilians” and “Arabs” exists within the mosques of São Paulo. Generally speaking, within these spaces, the term *brasileiros* (Brazilians) refers to converts while *árabes* (Arabs) refers to Arab Muslim immigrants and their descendants. Throughout my time in the field, I noticed that both terms were used by converts as well as those who come from Arab Muslim families. Despite the fact that some Arab Muslim families have lived in Brazil for three generations or more, the label of “*árabe*” still sticks with them, and they are generally not referred to as “*brasileiros*” within the spaces of the mosques. While I could not find a precise answer to this, it appears that the terms are used to distinguish between those who were born into Muslim families, who are mainly Arab immigrants and their descendants, and those who adopted Islam later in life. Given that conversion to Islam has grown significantly since 9/11, perhaps the significance of these categories have become stronger as converts become a larger presence in São Paulo’s mosques. As a result, the term “*brasileiro*” as an identity marker has become more synonymous with “*convertido*”/“*revertido*.”

Many of the converts I met often discussed the relationship between them and Muslims of Arab descent, frequently referring to the cultural differences that existed between them. Considering that most of these converts come from families who have been in Brazil for many more generations than most families of Arab Muslim descent, they often viewed themselves as being more “Brazilian.” The Arab immigrants, after all, are more recent arrivals who come with their own distinct customs and language. While conducting my fieldwork, it appeared that converts, conscious of their status as newcomers to Islam, were inclined to creating a distinct identity as “*muçulmanos brasileiros*” (Brazilian Muslims). Since they come from Brazilian families and have difficulty in fully integrating into the Arab Muslim community, this identity

serves as a hybrid of multiple markers. By referring to themselves as Brazilian Muslims, converts have more ease in reconciling several complex identities.

### Choosing Arabic Muslim Names

The majority of the converts I met and interviewed adopted Arabic names after their conversion to Islam. While this is not required as part of the conversion process, many of them choose to adopt new names to mark their new identities as Muslims. In one way, this marks a new slate in their life. Although the converts I met did not legally change their names, their "Muslim" names hold much symbolic value for them. One of my informants stated that he insisted people call him by his new name because it was part of his identity. Calling him by his previous name hinted to the very past he wished to overcome. Furthermore, using their new names allows them to better integrate with existing Muslim communities in that their Arabic names automatically mark them as Muslims within the mosques. If converts chose to use their previous names, it would cause more uncertainty as to whether or not someone would immediately recognize them as Muslim. They draw a distinction between their "Brazilian" names and their "Muslim" names. What exactly is a Brazilian name? Given that Brazil is made up of people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, it is difficult to determine what truly a Brazilian name is. However, I interpreted this to mean Portuguese names common in Brazil. By choosing a "Muslim" name, converts further construct their new identities as Muslims.

### Islam as a Universal Religion

Anyone regardless of their ethnic background can become a Muslim. Because of this, many of the Muslims I met, both converts and those born into Muslim families, stated that anyone could reconstruct their religious identities by converting to Islam. This is very significant

because it implies that converting to Islam, in their view, allows people to clear their past sins and begin anew. Of course, conversion does not relieve one of the many identities ascribed to an individual over the course of his or her lifetime. However, it allows one to bring a new one into play with them. Because of this, many of the converts I met believed that Islam was a viable choice as a religion for the Brazilian people. Because Islam is not a religion for a particular ethnic group, they argued that Islam could become nativized since it did not require the total rejection of local cultures. The adoption of Islam, then, allows for the adoption of new identities that did not exist before.

### Chapter 3: A Transnational Muslim Identity

Many of the Muslims that I met in São Paulo praised the universality of Islam. To them, being a Muslim in Brazil was the same as being a Muslim anywhere else—at least at the spiritual level. Despite the differences in interpretations, they argued that Muslims everywhere were united by the core principals of Islam, such as the belief in one God and in Muhammad as the final messenger. “Peter” echoes this widely-held viewpoint:

Being Muslim in Brazil has the same meaning of being Muslim in any other part of the world because a Muslim in any part of the world is Muslim. There are rules. There is the religion.<sup>16</sup>

He argues that rules of Islam, however he interprets them, create the framework that provides the basis for a universal Muslim identity. Islam, for people who hold such a view, is a universal and timeless religion. Similarly, Bilal, a convert in his early 60s, states that Islam is compatible not only with Brazilian cultures but all cultures:

Islam is not only compatible with Brazilian culture but all cultures because Islam is the last constitution that was sent to Earth. So there’s no way of it being incompatible with something. Islam came from Paradise. Allah has written that on the stones that he has there... And he just transmitted it through the angel Gabriel to Earth, so there aren’t ways of it being incompatible.<sup>17</sup>

In this quote, he argues that Islam is the last constitution sent to earth from God. Essentially, it is a guide of divine origin meant for all living things. Through this example, it is clear that this universality allows for Islam to have a transnational component to it. By embracing a transnational Muslim identity rather than a country-specific or regional one, the Muslims of São Paulo connect themselves to Muslims worldwide.

---

<sup>16</sup> Ser muçulmano no Brasil tem o mesmo significado de ser muçulmano em qualquer outro lugar no mundo porque o muçulmano em qualquer lugar no mundo é muçulmano. Tem as regras. Tem a religião.

<sup>17</sup> O Islã não é só compatível com cultura brasileira como todas as culturas porque o Islã é a última constituição que foi mandada para a terra. Então não tem jeito dela ser incompatível com alguma coisa. O Islã veio do Paraíso. Allah tem escrito isso lá nas pedras que ele tem... E ele só o transmitiu através do anjo Gabriel para a Terra, então não tem meios de ser incompatível.

Upon becoming Muslims, converts join a large community of coreligionists that exists across the world. Their conversion to Islam allows them to feel like they share a set of values and experiences with Muslims living in other places. Because of this, they often feel a sense of solidarity with the global Muslim community as they see it. Converting to Islam frequently gives converts the opportunity to embrace a transnational identity that allows them to place their reality within the context of a religious identity that crosses borders. In this section I will analyze how Muslim converts in the city begin to feel a greater sense of feeling part of a transnational community by adopting Islam.

### Transnationality of Islam

John Bowen describes Islam as a transnational religion not limited by borders. Like Christianity, it preaches an intrinsic universality, proclaiming to be a religion for all of mankind rather than for a particular group of people (882). Similarly, the message of the Qur'an condemned the worship of localized deities in sixth century Arabia in favor a monotheistic, transcendent god. This god, from the perspective of Islam, is omnipresent and eternal. Furthermore, the centers of Islamic intellectual thought and political authority have shifted through the centuries. This is evident by the fact that the capitals of the Caliphate changed over time and that the Islamic era began with the migration of the Muslim community from Mecca to Medina, although Mecca has remained the holiest city and focal point of Islam throughout history. These factors show that Islam is an inherently deterritorialized religion, a fact that many of my informants used to argue that a Muslim in Brazil is no different than a Muslim living elsewhere. While his or her circumstances may change, Islam remains the same no matter where it is practiced.

The Hajj is an example of an event that brings Muslims from throughout the world together in one place. Besides serving as a religious pilgrimage, it also serves to show the transnationality of Muslims throughout the world, and it is symbolic by the way it shows the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the Muslim world. Muslims throughout the world must pray towards Mecca, where the Hajj takes place, in their daily prayers. Thus, the location of the Hajj serves as a religious focal point for Muslims throughout the world, regardless of their interpretations of Islam. Malise Ruthven says:

The Hajj, the most central event in the Islamic calendar, cannot be described as a purely religious festival. With so many Muslims gathered together from different parts of the world, it contains a political message and the potential for political action. The political ideals of Islam - universal justice and equality, regardless of tribe, nation or race - are implicit in the rituals themselves. They are performed in the state of *ihram*, ritual purity, in which all men (and most women) wear the white *kaffran* or seamless shroud which they will keep for their burials, a uniform which removes all outward signs of distinction between them (Ruthven 2000: 7).

In this way, the Hajj is symbolic of the entire worldwide Muslim community, and Mecca and the Hajj help to create the notion of an imagined community. Muslims come from a diverse range of backgrounds, and because of this sheer diversity, the Hajj helps to anchor the entire community to a certain place. By becoming Muslims, converts become a part of this imagined community, even though they may not have Muslim “ancestry.”

According to Benedict Anderson, the advent of the printing press and the distribution of literature helped create imagined communities. To this end, the Qur'an has helped bind Muslims worldwide by linking people of many cultural backgrounds through the belief in one text, much like how the Bible has connected Christians across time and space. Despite the differences among different schools of thought and sects, Muslims believe in the message of the Qur'an as the final holy book of God, reciting its chapters in classical Arabic in their daily prayers.

Anderson argues that the *ummah* (the Muslim world) has historically been the result of the creation of an imagined community through the use of a written sacred language (13). He says "if Maguindanao met Berbers in Mecca, knowing nothing of each other's languages, incapable of communicating orally, they nonetheless understood each other's ideographs, because the sacred texts they shared existed only in classical Arabic." This example shows that the Qur'an and its message have the ability to bind two distinct groups together. He adds that "written Arabic functioned... to create a community out of signs, not sounds," implying that simply the appearance of the book's text helped create a sense of unity. Based on Anderson's argument, the Qur'an helped create the sense of a worldwide Muslim community in the past, although I would argue that the book continues to play the same function in modern times. São Paulo's Muslims typically asserted the idea that despite the numerous interpretations of Islam that divided them, and the people I interviewed all agreed on the divinity and importance of the Qur'an in the spiritual lives of Muslims.

#### Transnationality of São Paulo's Muslim Community

The Muslims of São Paulo represent a transnational community. To begin with, the origins of the community are transnational in nature, considering that most of the Muslims today arrived as immigrants or are the descendants of immigrants. Many of them continue to maintain contact with friends and family in their countries of origin, and they often take trips to visit them and to introduce the younger generations to their ancestral roots. Furthermore, many converts first gained an interest in Islam because of its portrayal in the media. The numerous events involving Muslims that they witnessed through the medium of television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, such as the attacks of 9/11 and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict caused

them to research the religion. Events taking place thousands of miles away in places they knew little about had strong repercussions for them. As Islam becomes more localized, there will be an increasing need to embrace a Brazilian identity to allow for the children of immigrants and converts to relate their religion to the realities they face on a day-to-day basis.

São Paulo's Muslims may be pressured to embrace a transnational religious identity due to their position as a minority religious group in a country where Islam remains relatively hidden. Because of this, the city's Muslims frequently look towards countries with large Muslim populations as a source of inspiration. For them there is strength in numbers by embracing a transnational identity. By limiting themselves to a distinctly Brazilian Muslim identity, they symbolically set themselves apart from other Muslims. However, by embracing a broader identity, they can tap into the billion-strong worldwide Muslim community. Furthermore, this transnational identity recognizes the international component of the Muslims in São Paulo, who are mainly immigrants or children of immigrants. If Islam was brought from overseas, then, of course, the very nature of the community is transnational. Of course, this transnationalism is not limited to Brazil's Muslim population, as modern Brazil is the creation of globalization and transnationalism.

There is a strong political component as to how many of São Paulo's Muslims embrace a transnational Muslim identity. Many of my informants expressed solidarity with Muslims worldwide, especially those living in lands under foreign military occupation. By viewing their coreligionists as brothers and sisters, they place the notion of a Muslim identity at a transnational level. Because my informants viewed their religion as universal and transnational, they had further reason to sympathize with Muslim causes worldwide. By sympathizing with other people practicing (or at least identifying with) the same religion, they were able to relate their own

existence with that of Muslims in other parts of the world. Muslims in Brazil live as a minority, and their religion is a mystery to many people. Because of this, my informants took comfort in relating to Muslim populations worldwide.

### Muslim Identity as a Prominent Identity

Oswaldo Truzzi argues that Arab Muslims in Brazil tend to place their religious identity over their ethnic identity more than their Arab Christian counterparts (67). During the course of my fieldwork, I noticed this tendency among many members of the Muslim community of São Paulo—both Arabs and non-Arabs. The notion of a Muslim identity that transcends borders is not unique to Muslims in the city, as Islam is a transnational religion that allows its followers to practice it anywhere. The notion of placing one's religious identity in importance over his or her other identities does not mean a total negation or disregard for them. Rather, it implies that Islam places such a significant role in that person's life that other factors, such as ethnicity and nationality, dwarf it.

The tendency for many practicing Muslims in the São Paulo area to place greater importance on their religious identity shows the place it has in their lives. This does not mean that they negate the importance of their other forms of identity. Instead, it shows that they choose to embrace an identity that allows them to join a "community" of over a billion people worldwide. Many of my informants believed that because the rules of Islam were universal, Islam transcended national boundaries and can exist in any society. Yusuf argues that "the whole world is a mosque":

The Creator of the universe is everywhere. A mosque isn't necessary for a Muslim to pray. A Muslim can pray anywhere on the planet. Both in the Sahara Desert and Paulista Avenue or on

Fifth Avenue in New York or in the Coliseum in Rome—wherever. The whole world is a mosque, as the Prophet used to say. You can pray anywhere.<sup>18</sup>

He suggests that because God is everywhere, it is not necessary for a Muslim to go to a mosque to pray and that a Muslim could worship Him anywhere in the world. In this way he shows that Islam is a geographically decentralized religion and that a Muslim identity could be embraced anywhere. This transnational identity allows Brazil's Muslims to join a much larger imagined community and thus embrace a more inclusive identity.

### Transnationality of Muslim Organizations

Peres de Oliveira says that the São Paulo metropolitan area is home to 40% of Brazil's Muslims and that the Muslims in the area have a large number of Muslim institutions (7). Furthermore, they have "many contacts with the Islamic world and access to capital to finance their activities, more so than most of the Brazilian communities." This puts the Muslims of São Paulo at an advantage over their counterparts in other parts of Brazil who may have more limited resources. In addition, many of the Muslim institutions in São Paulo receive their funding from international organizations, which are mainly headquartered in Saudi Arabia, although local Muslims fund their activities through their own donations as well. The reliance on funding from overseas sources shows that the Muslims of São Paulo are also connected to Muslims in other countries because of their financial needs. Interestingly, the emphasis on a transnational Muslim identity allows them to tap into the resources of Muslim organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental, from abroad.

---

<sup>18</sup> O criador do universo está em todos lugares. Não é necessário uma mesquita para um muçulmano rezar. Um muçulmano pode rezar em qualquer lugar do planeta. Tanto no Deserto do Saara quanto na Avenida Paulista ou na Quinta Avenida em Novo Iorque ou no Coliseu em Roma—em qualquer lugar. A terra inteira é uma mesquita como o Profeta já dizia. Você pode rezar em qualquer lugar.

## The *Ummah*

Instead of thinking of one interpretation of the *ummah*, it is better to think of multiple. The concept of a worldwide Muslim community varied widely among the people I interviewed. What is the *ummah* to them, what does it signify, and where does it exist? Gary Blunt suggests that multiple concepts of the *ummah* exist in cyberspace:

I would suggest that, rather than a single *ummah* idealized as a classical Islamic concept, in fact there are numerous parallel *ummah* frameworks operating in cyberspace, reflecting diverse notions of the concepts of community. This reflects online conceptualizations of Muslim identity and authority that mirror similar ideas in the nondigital world but which can also nurture new networks of understandings in cyberspace. It is a natural phenomenon for a net-literate generation to seek out specific truths and affiliations online when they cannot be accessed in the local mosque or community context (32)

Blunt suggests that the classical concept of the *ummah* has shifted to fit the needs of the digital world. Because of this, it is easier for Muslims to create various notions of community since they can more easily access diverse groups worldwide through the power of the Internet. During the course of my fieldwork, I met many Muslims who readily used the Internet in order to learn more about Islam and to connect with other Muslims. For the Muslims who had little day-to-day interaction with other Muslims, this was very important because it allowed them directly communicate with Muslims across Brazil and in other countries. Social networking web sites, such as Orkut and Facebook, were one of the primary ways in which they interacted. In addition, chat programs, such as MSN Messenger, enabled these Muslims to instantaneously chat with other Muslims. Thus, even though many of the converts did not have frequent face-to-face interaction with other Muslims, they could at least communicate in the virtual world with others who shared the same religion.

## Tablighi Jamaat: A Transnational Movement

The Tablighi Jamaat spiritual reform movement has spread far beyond the borders of India, where it originated in 1926, to Muslim communities worldwide. Some members of the Muslim community of São Paulo actively participate in the movement, traveling throughout the country and abroad to spread the word of Islam to Muslims. Given this interaction between Muslims in Brazil, both converts and those raised in Muslim families, and Muslims abroad, it is clear that there is a transnational component to the Tablighi Jamaat movement. Despite coming from diverse backgrounds, participants in the movement come together for a common purpose: spreading the word of Islam to other Muslims to bring them closer to the faith. According to Muhammad Khalid Masud:

The Tablighī Jamā'at has adopted transnational travel and physical movement as a means of *Da'wa*, and travel appears to have become a characteristic feature of the movement. Reports about the gatherings of the Jamā'at in the news media typically carry pictures of Tablighīs walking along roadsides with bedding on their shoulders or riding the trains in spectacularly large numbers. Groups of Tablighīs knocking at neighborhood doors inviting people to come out to the mosque is a common sight in South Asia and in many other places. The most important and frequent activity of an adept of the Jamā'at is going out for God's sake (Masud 2000: xvi).

Travel within countries and across borders helps physically connect many distinct Muslim communities together. The trips conducted by members of the São Paulo Muslim community help bring together Muslims throughout the country by allowing them to meet one another and exchange contact information. Many of the people I met who went on these trips had limited interaction with Muslims in their day-to-day lives. Thus, these trips allowed them to expand their circle of Muslim friends and become part of a larger transnational community.

## Chapter 4: The Future of Muslim Identity in Brazil

The religious demographics of Brazil have changed significantly in Brazil over the past several decades as the percentage of Catholics has decreased. According to the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, the percentage of Catholics fell from 95.2% of the population in 1940 to 73.8% in 2000 (Pierucci 2000: 20). At the same time, the percentage of Evangelicals increased from 2.6% to 15.4%, and the percentage of Brazilians who declared "no religion" increased from 0.2% to 7.3%. As these data show, the perception of Brazil as an overwhelmingly Catholic country will have to adapt to these demographic changes. The decline of Catholicism in Brazil is primarily due to conversion to Protestantism as well as to an increase in the number of people abandoning religion entirely. Does this change mean that religious minorities, including Muslims, will have a greater say in the national narrative in the years to come? As the influence of the Catholic Church decreases in Brazil, new issues in discourses surrounding national identity will continue to arise. Since fewer Brazilians declare themselves as Catholics, this may mean that Catholicism is decreasing as an important marker of Brazilian identity. This large-scale remaking of religious identity, a growing awareness and acceptance of multiculturalism, and the influence of the media in shaping the image of Muslims will likely continue to play an instrumental role in placing Islam into the national narrative in the years to come.

Despite the increased discussion about Islam and Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11, the Muslim population of Brazil remains relatively hidden from the view of the public. Islam is widely perceived as a foreign religion in São Paulo and the rest of the country, even though it has existed in Brazil for at least two centuries. Many in the Muslim community, including converts, believe that this is because local Muslims have not taken a large-scale, organized effort to

educate the rest of the population about their religion and way of life. While many of the Muslims I met complained about their relative invisibility, they believed that this could be changed over time if Muslims in Brazil were more proactive about showcasing their faith. Given that reports about events involving Muslims abroad have increased significantly in the media, it is likely that Brazil's Muslims will receive greater attention over the years, as they are the representatives of Islam in the country. However, considering that much of the coverage of Muslims involves violent conflicts, the message relayed to Brazilian audiences generally has not produced favorable images of Islam and its followers. According to Sheren H. Razack, "Three allegorical figures have come to dominate the social landscape of the 'war on terror' and its ideological underpinning of a clash of civilizations: the dangerous Muslim man, the imperilled Muslim woman, and the civilized European, the latter a figure who is seldom explicitly named but who nevertheless anchors the first two figures" (5). The former two figures seem to be the most widely-viewed ones in the eyes of many of the Muslims I met in São Paulo.

The practice of Islam will have to be adapted to the social realities of Brazil in order to ensure its survival and propagation by future generations of Muslims in the country. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, many converts stated that mosque leadership in São Paulo, which is mostly dominated by Lebanese immigrants, will have to have a better understanding of local cultures to fit the needs of Muslims. These converts argued that Muslim youth must see a purpose for Islam. If they do not understand how Islam is relevant for them, they will abandon it. Similarly, if non-Muslims view Islam as a foreign faith, they argue, they will not have an interest in converting to Islam. Furthermore, many of the converts I met believed that it was important for mosque leadership to understand the spiritual needs of converts. Since the vast majority of them do not have Muslim relatives, they may have more difficulty in maintaining Islam and may

ultimately abandon the religion entirely if they do not find it relevant to their reality. Thus, leadership at mosques will have to be aware of these challenges, especially for converts who may not have a large Muslim social network. Adapting the practice of Islam to life in Brazil does not mean that the core tenets of the faith will have to be compromised. Rather, rather these tenets will have to be reconciled with the cultures of the diverse regions of Brazil to flourish and continue for generations.

The future of Islam in São Paulo and maybe even in Brazil more broadly will increasingly depend on converts to ensure its growth and propagation, especially since few Muslim immigrants continue to come to Brazil. While no reliable statistics on the number of converts in São Paulo exist, my interviews and conversations with numerous community members indicate that many more converts have adopted Islam since 9/11. Since the convert population has grown substantially in the past nine years, it is necessary for the mosques to adapt to accommodate for their specific needs. Islam in Brazil has historically been an African and Arab religion, and this increase in conversion will continue to shape change the demographics of the community.

#### Islam as an “Arab” Religion

Despite the fact that Islam has existed in Brazil for centuries, it is often perceived as a relatively new and exotic religion in the country. For many Brazilians, Islam is an ethnic religion confined to a particular sector of the Arab Brazilian community. Peres de Oliveira says that “[t]his ethnic or nearly ethnic character is due to the fact that Islam behaves as a religion for an ethnic group for which it is a bonding element in the community, that allows it to speak its native

language and compose its specific ethnic identity" (4). This implies that Islam and Muslims of Arab descent in Brazil are intrinsically related. José discusses this issue:

I see that the Islamic community is sometimes confused a little bit with the Lebanese Brazilian community that is very strong here in Brazil, which has the country that has more Lebanese outside of Lebanon. Because of that, the very image of Islam becomes very stuck with the image of the Arab Lebanese community.<sup>19</sup>

In this quote he says that sometimes the Muslim community is viewed as part of the Lebanese community in Brazil. While he recognizes that the majority of Muslims in Brazil are of Lebanese origin, he does not view Islam as a strictly Lebanese or Arab religion and wants to separate Islam from the image that Islam is an "Arab" religion. Given that the vast majority of Muslims in Brazil have Arab ancestry, it should come as no surprise that Islam is so closely tied to the Arab community. However, a handful of non-Arab Muslim immigrants do live in Brazil, and the number of black, white, and mixed-race converts has increased substantially in recent years, especially in São Paulo. Several of the converts that I met believed that the perception of Islam as an "Arab" religion hindered its growth in Brazil among non-Muslims. They argued that if more Brazilians knew that anyone could adopt Islam—not just Arabs—more people would convert to it. Although they attributed part of this perception to the media, they argued that Arab Muslims in Brazil have not taken serious effort in teaching non-Muslims about their religion, implying that the Muslim community is partially to blame for the misconception that Islam is solely an "Arab" religion and not a Brazilian one.

The vast majority of Muslim leaders at the mosques in São Paulo are Arab immigrants, and most of the sheikhs of the mosque are immigrants as well. Many of the converts I

---

<sup>19</sup> Eu vejo que a comunidade islâmica brasileira é às vezes confundida um pouco com a comunidade libanesa brasileira que é uma comunidade muito forte aqui no Brasil que é o país que mais tem libaneses fora do Líbano. Por causa disso, a própria imagem do Islã fica muito grudada com a imagem da comunidade árabe libanesa.

interviewed complained about the lack of "Brazilian" leadership at the mosques. They argued that they did not fully understand Brazilian culture and that "Brazilians" could better deal with the Brazilian public and thus better articulate a distinct Brazilian Muslim identity. One of my informants argued that there should be more African Muslim leaders to relate to the black masses in Brazil, arguing that this was a logical thing to do to spread the religion. By arguing for a change in leadership, this implies a change in identity of the leadership. By switching from Arab to "Brazilian" leaders, this shows that the Muslim community, in the view of the converts, should be localized.

#### Changing Notion of Muslim Identity

Notions of Muslim identity continue to shift in reaction to a multitude of stimuli both within and outside of the Muslim community in São Paulo. Given that the city's Muslims find themselves situated in a country where questions of identity are constantly being debated and negotiated, this should come as no surprise. Brazil has a population of nearly 200 million inhabitants who come from many ethnic backgrounds and practice a number of religions. Given this diversity, the question of identity has been a constant issue. As more and more people convert to Islam in Brazil, notions of Muslimness may continue to change. Furthermore, events happening outside of Brazil continue to shape Muslim identity in São Paulo. Because 9/11 brought Islam to the forefront of discussion, many Muslims in Brazil find themselves in a position where they must defend their religion from prejudice and misinformation. By challenging the notion of Muslims as inherently terrorists and religious extremists, they are working to create their own identity by fighting the identity ascribed to them by others. Forms of

Muslim identity and their meanings are elastic and are bound to change over the course of history.

## Bibliography

- Aitchison, Cara, Peter Hopkins, and Mei-po Kwan. *Geographies of Muslim Identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 2006.
- Baer, Werner. *The Brazilian Economy: Growth and Development*. 6th ed. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2008.
- Baiocchi, Gianpaolo. "Media Coverage of 9-11 in Brazil." *Television & New Media* 3.2 (2002): 183-189.
- Blunt, Gary R. *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Bowen, John R. "Beyond Migration: Islam as a Transnational Public Space." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30.5 (Sept. 2004): 879-894.
- Chesnut, R. Andrew. *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Corten, André. *Pentecostalism in Brazil: Emotion of the Poor and Theological Romanticism*. Trans. Arianne Dorval. St. Martin's Press, Inc.: New York: 1999.
- Curtis, Edward E. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- Filho, Omar Nasser. *O crescente e a estrela na terra dos pinheiros: Os árabes muçulmanos em Curitiba (1945-1984)*. MA thesis. Universidade Federal do Paraná, 2006. Curitiba: UFPR, 2006.
- Garrard-Burnett, Virginia and David Stoll, eds. *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

- Karam, John Tofik. *Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007.
- Lesser, Jeffrey. "Immigration and Shifting Conceptions of National Identity in Brazil during the Vargas Era." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 31.2 (1994): 23-44.
- . *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil*. Duke University Press: Durham, 1999.
- Lesser, Jeffrey and Ignacio Klich, eds. *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities*. Portland: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1998.
- Lovejoy, Paul E. "Jihad e escravidão: as origens dos escravos muçulmanos da Bahia." *Topoi* 1.1 (2000): 11-44.
- Martin, David. *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1990.
- Mariz, Cecília Loreto. *Coping with Poverty: Pentecostals and Christian Base Communities in Brazil*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.
- Masud, Muhammad Khalid, ed. *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablīghī Jamā'at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal*. Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2000.
- Montenegro, Silvia M. "Discursos e contradiscursos: O olhar da mídia sobre of Islã no Brasil." *Mana* 8.1 (2002): 63-91.
- Nash, Michael. *Islam among Urban Blacks: Muslims in Newark, New Jersey: A Social History*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2008.
- Nieuwkerk, Karin van, ed. *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

- Peres de Oliveira, Vitória. "Islam in Brazil or the Islam of Brazil?" *Religião e Sociedade* 26.1 (2006): 83-114.
- Pierucci, Antônio Flávio. "'Bye bye, Brasil" - O declínio das religiões tradicionais no Censo 2000." *Estudos Avançados* 18.52 (2004): 17-28.
- Razack, Sherene H. *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law & Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 2008
- Reis, João José. *Rebelião escrava no Brasil: A história do levante dos malês em 1835*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003.
- Ruthven, Malise. *Islam in the World*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Sansone, Livio. *Blackness without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2003.
- Selka, Stephen. *Religion and the Politics of Ethnic Identity in Bahia, Brazil*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007.
- Skidmore, Thomas E. *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Stoll, David. *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?: The Politics of Evangelical Growth*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- . "Sociabilidades e valores: um olhar sobre a família árabe muçulmana em São Paulo." *Dados - Revista de Ciências Sociais* 51.1 (2008): 37-74.