



THE EMERGENCE OF RIO DE JANEIRO'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN THE CITY'S PUBLIC SPACE

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ABSTRACT

Arab migrants –mostly Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian– compose the majority of Muslims in Brazil. Until the beginning of the 21st century, the Islamic institutions present in the country are mainly concerned with the transmission of Islam as a cultural heritage to their descendants. Rio de Janeiro's Muslim community presents a particularity since, in the beginning of the 1990s, it's Islamic Mutual-Aid Association discontinues the transmission of Islam as an Arab religion, separating religion and culture, thus making Islam accessible to the Brazilian public. This leads to an important increase in the number of Muslims in Rio, as well as the construction of the city's only operational mosque in 2007. Exemplary, this case sheds light on the ways a new religious actor emerges in the religious urban landscape of the city. This essay examines the emergence of Rio de Janeiro's Muslim community in the urban and public space of the city.

Keywords: Islam in Brazil, Rio de Janeiro's Muslim community, Religious Urban Anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

It is in the 18th century that Islam first arrives in Brazil, with the influx of slaves from Islamized regions of Western Africa, known as “Malês”¹. Between

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¹ Derived from the Nigerian-Congolese language iorubá, the term “malê” designates the Muslim.

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1807 and 1835, the Malês rebel several times for the liberation of African slaves. Amongst these insurgences, there is the most significant slaves rebellion in Brazil, the “Revolta dos Malês”, which takes place in Salvador da Bahia in 1835. Quickly repressed, this racial uprising was organized by hauçá and nagô ethnic groups of Muslim religion (Reis, 2003 [1986]).

During the following century, syncretism with Catholicism occurs, as well as with other African beliefs. This leads to the decline of those first Islamic communities, which disappear completely by the middle of the 20th century (Rodrigues, 2004 [1906]). Simultaneously, diverse migration waves from the Middle East disembark in Brazil². In the second half of the 20th century, the profile of the Arab migration in the country changes from being predominantly Christian (it was the case during the earlier period) to being primarily composed by Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, who leave their countries due to the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the continuous occupation of the Palestinian Territories (Pinto, 2010) and, more recently, the Syrian conflict³.

Arab migrants – mostly Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian - and their descendants thus compose the majority of Muslims in Brazil. This is the reason why, as far as Islam is concerned, there is confusion between religion, nationality and ethnicity in the country’s collective imaginary. Until the beginning of the 21st century, the Islamic institutions of the different Muslim communities in Brazil are mainly concerned with the transmission of cultural traditions to Arab descendants (Pinto, 2010), reinforcing this amalgam. That said, whereas most Muslim institutions still choose to focus their efforts towards those who bear Islam as a cultural heritage, *the growing number of non-Arab Brazilians who convert to Islam in the last decades contributes to the formation of a renewed Islamic community in the country*⁴.

Although Islam only represents a minor part of the Brazilian religious field, which is predominantly Christian, over the last years it is gaining visibility in the country. It is significant that, in 2010, the Brazilian government acknowledges the Muslim communities by including, for the first time, the term “Islamism” as

² There is a consensus in the immigration’s literature indicating that the first Arab migratory wave in Brazil occurs in 1860 (Hajjar, 1985). That said, this data can be questioned. Oswaldo Truzzi (1997), for instance, indicates that the first Syrian and Lebanese groups arrive in Brazil as early as during the decade of 1870. These divergences can be explained by the fact that, until 1908, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants were not discriminated by the migratory registers, being classified as “other nationalities” (Truzzi, 1997). Later on, they were identified as Turkish, Turkish-Arabic, Turkish-Asian, Lebanese and Syrian.

³ By October 2015, about 8,000 Syrians or Syrian-Palestinians had obtained a humanitarian visa to enter Brazil. For more information on Brazilian reception of Syrian refugees, see Baeza, 2017.

⁴ If it is hard to define their exact number, we know they participate in the 29% increase in the number of Muslims indicated by the 2010 demographic censuses in relation to the previous one (2000). The numbers of the Union of Islamic Institutions in Brazil (UNI) confirm this as, since 2004, the number of sheiks who speak Portuguese increased from 5 to 20.

a religious obedience in its demographic census⁵. This census indicates 35.167 adepts of Islam in Brazil, against 27.239 in 2000. Local Muslim religious authorities claim these numbers largely inferior to the reality. The Brazilian Islamic Federation (FAMBRAS, Portuguese acronym) vindicates about one and a half million Muslims in the country⁶.

Muslim communities in Brazil are predominantly urban (99,2%) with large concentrations in the states of São Paulo, Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and Mato Grosso do Sul⁷. Most of the Shia communities are located in São Paulo and the South Region of Brazil, notably Curitiba and Foz do Iguaçu. Sunni communities are located in a larger area of the national territory, being mainly concentrated in the states of São Paulo, Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul, Rio de Janeiro and Distrito Federal. The Islamic institutions in Brazil receive the legal name of “Islamic Mutual-Aid Associations” (*Sociedades Beneficentes Muçulmanas*). FAMBRAS indicates there are about fifty mosques and over eighty Islamic institutions in the country.

These Muslim institutions and communities structure themselves differently over time, presenting specific sociological and religious contours. Rio de Janeiro’s Muslim community has a particularity since, in the beginning of the 1990s, it’s Islamic Mutual-Aid Association (SBMRJ, Portuguese acronym) deliberately discontinues the transmission of Islam as an Arab religion, breaking with the ethnicization of Brazilian Muslim communities⁸. Described by anthropologists as “Islamization” (Montenegro, 2002b) or “objectivization” (Pinto 2005), this separation of religion and culture makes Islam accessible to the Brazilian public⁹. It has led to an impressive increase in the number of Muslims in Rio (SBMRJ estimates their community is composed of 85% converts) and the subsequent construction of the city’s only operational mosque in 2007.

This essay examines the emergence of Rio de Janeiro’s Muslim community in the urban and public space of city. Exemplary, this case allows us to shed light on the ways a new religious actor, which does not traditionally have an

⁵ In the previous demographic census, Islam is not differentiated; it is comprised in the group “other religions”.

⁶ These quarrels regarding the numbers are part of a larger demand concerning the question of the presence and the visibility of Islam as a minority in the Brazilian religious field (Pinto, 2013).

⁷ Source: Brazil’s 2010 demographic census (IBGE, Portuguese acronym).

⁸ SBMRJ’s attitude contrasts clearly with the position adopted by the Muslim leadership in São Paulo, for example, whose efforts remain directed to those who bear Islam as a cultural heritage (Peres, 2006).

⁹ As I have argued before, « beyond the national sphere, SBMRJ repositioning inscribes itself in a larger tendency observed by Olivier Roy (2002), in which ‘the new element brought about by the passage of Islam to the West is the disconnection of Islam as religion from a concrete culture’ (2002: 20). (...) the dynamics observed at this Association correspond to this movement of ‘globalization of Islam’, which is characterized by a double movement of individualization and deterritorialisation” (Dias, 2011: 495).

important expression in a given society, emerges in the religious urban landscape of the city¹⁰. We will start by approaching the construction of Rio de Janeiro's mosque, examining the choice of the neighbourhood, the process of conversion of the building into a mosque and the implications of the notion of "Islamic architecture" adopted by SBMRJ. We will then examine how the Society invests Rio's urban space and media vehicles, increasing Islam's visibility in the city and creating different dialogue channels with the larger society.

1. THE CONSTRUCTION OF RIO DE JANEIRO'S MOSQUE

The oldest Islamic institution in Brazil was created in São Paulo in 1929. It was also São Paulo's Islamic Mutual-Aid Association (SBMSP, Portuguese acronym) that built the first mosque in the country, the Mesquita Brasil (Brazil Mosque), inaugurated in 1952¹¹. For a long time, it remained the main institutional reference for both Sunni and Shia Muslims in Brazil. Between 1929 and 1969, Druses and Alaouites created their own institutions in the states of Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Other Islamic Mutual-Aid Associations were created in Rio de Janeiro and Paraná during the 1950s. But the construction of Islamic worship places in Brazil did not really start before the 1980s. From then, several mosques – mainly Sunni - were built in the states of Paraná, São Paulo, Mato Grosso, Goiás and Minas Gerais. Constructed with idealized Islamic architectural details, they were a response to the increase of the number of Arab migrants.

Rio de Janeiro's Islamic Mutual-Aid Association was created as early as in 1951, but the construction of its mosque only started in 2007, over 60 years after the construction of Brazil's first mosque in São Paulo and almost 20 years after Islamic worship places significantly started to be built in the country. In fact, from the 1980's several mosques were built in the states of Paraná, São Paulo, Mato Grosso, Goiás and Minas Gerais. They corresponded to the increase of the number of Muslim migrants in these regions. Since the 1980s, the main regions chosen by Arab migrants are São Paulo and Paraná, due to the economical opportunities these two states offered (Pinto, 2010b). Rio de Janeiro, on the other hand, did not constitute a privileged destination for Arab migrants, who did not see in it the same economical opportunities other states offered¹². The

¹⁰ This essay inscribes itself on the urban studies field. It is in continuity with the research I carried out for the collective project "Global Prayers: Contemporary Manifestations of the Religious in the City" (see Dias 2011).

¹¹ Built with donations from the Egyptian monarchy, Mesquita Brasil started to be constructed in the 1940s.

¹² In absolute terms, after the decade of 1950, the Arab migration in Brazil declines. Besides the diminution in a national scale, the percentage of immigrants who chose Rio de Janeiro as final destination also declines significantly. (Pinto, 2010b)

construction of an Islamic temple in the city of Rio de Janeiro responded, rather, to an increase in the number of Brazilians converting to Islam.

Indeed, the perception of the necessity of a mosque by SBMRJ's leadership was a result of its local history and own internal processes, notably a shift in its politics towards Brazilians with no Muslim ancestors. In 1993, the leadership of SBMRJ - a small group of Muslims with Arabic origins - put forward a project of making the Association an instrument for the diffusion of Islam. With the understanding that diffusing Islam is "a religious obligation" (*dawa*), they create a course of introduction to Islam and Arabic language, a first effort toward the Brazilian public¹³.

Until 2007, SBMRJ's activities took place in a prayer hall (*musalla*) located in a commercial building of central Rio. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the city's Centro, in particular Rua da Alfândega and surrounding areas, were invested by Arab cultural elements that characterized them as an ethnic space, to the point that, during the 1920s, non-Arabs referred to the region as "*Pequena Turquia*", Portuguese for "Little Turkey" (Pinto, 2010b). In effect, "the region was perceived by the migrants themselves and their descendants as a space of expression of cultural traditions that sent to the Middle East and allowed a constant 're-elaboration' of ethnical and national identity¹⁴" (Pinto, 2010b: 85). In 1962, a group of traders composed mainly by Arabs, but also by Jewish, Portuguese and other migrants, created the SAARA – Society of Friends of the Adjacencies of Rua da Alfândega¹⁵. Gradually, this term detached itself from the Association of traders to designate the urban space it administrated, the *Saara*.

The street Gomes Freire, where SBMRJ's *mussalla* was located, is relatively close to Rua da Alfândega. Although this street it is not situated within the fluid borders of the *Saara*, the *mussalla*'s emplacement in the Centro was in continuity with the perception of the larger area as an Arab ethnic space. As Marcelo¹⁶ - young Brazilian convert responsible for the mosque's communication area – explains, "the *mussalla* was essentially the gathering place of a group of Muslims of Arab origin. At that time, there wasn't a project of divulging Islam to non-Arab Brazilians"¹⁷. For a long time SBMRJ, just as the other Islamic institutions in Brazil, remained almost exclusively a space of congregation for the born Muslims, who gathered in the prayer hall for the Friday Prayers and *Eid*

¹³ Their efforts toward Brazilians make the mosque a welcoming structure, favourable to religious conversion. New Muslims receive, for example, a "convert kit" (*kit do revertido*), with the time of prayers and their translation, information and guidelines to practice the religion, as well as a CD with recordings of the prayers.

¹⁴ Our translation for *Sociedade de Amigos das Adjacências da Rua da Alfândega*.

¹⁵ Society of Friends of the Adjacencies of Rua da Alfândega. Our translation.

¹⁶ Fictitious name.

¹⁷ Interview with Marcelo, Mosque al-Nour, Rio de Janeiro, October, 2nd, 2010.

celebrations. The urban situation of the *mussalla* in the Centro was coherent with its social function.

Sami and Munzer, respectively the director of SBMRJ's educational department and the mosque's imam, are brothers of Syrian origin whose family traditionally owns clothing shops at the *Saara*. Sami shares the impressions of his childhood in the neighbourhood: "I could listen to the elderly talking Arabic in the streets, they talked to each other from the step of their shops. [...] Today it is not like that anymore, the Chinese are buying all the shops in here"¹⁸. In Sami's speech, the *Saara* appears as progressively deprived from its characterization as an ethnic Arab space. Currently, the mosque's leadership does not perceive Rio's central area mainly as the space of congregation of Arab descendants. Let us take, for instance, the answer Marcelo provided me with when questioned about the reasons for constructing the mosque elsewhere: "From 1951 to 2000 many changes took place in Rio's centre. It became a point of prostitution, a dangerous area"¹⁹. Lucas²⁰, another "carioca" converted to Islam, shares this view of the Centro, which he associates with his personal past of drug consumer: "it was easy to buy drugs in the Centro, you just had to go to Beco do Sardinha, the waiter would handle you the cocaine and offer the bathroom of the restaurant for you to use it". The new religious mapping of Rio carries moral valence: the public world of the centre city is characterized as the place of urban violence, dangerous people and illicit activities.

The change in the perception of Rio's centre is coherent with the shift that SBMRJ operated concerning the understanding of its own purpose. In the 1990s, SBMRJ called for a "desarabization" of Islam, focusing its efforts towards Brazilians. Over time, such efforts bore fruits: by the year 2000, Rio's Islamic community had grown to the point that the *mussalla*, composed by two commercial rooms with a total of 40m², was no longer sufficiently large. As Marcelo describes it, "on Fridays, we had to split in two different shifts for the prayers"²¹. Faced to the necessity of constructing a mosque, SBMRJ's leadership reached different Islamic institutions abroad.

The choice to break with the "Arabization" of the Muslim communities implied not aligning itself with a specific Arabic country. This meant that, differently from the mosques that proliferated in Brazil from the 1980s, SBMRJ did not count with financial funding from Saudi Arabia or Iran, whose "dispute for control over Islamic religious imagination passed by the establishment of influence channels within Muslim communities worldwide" (Pinto, 2010: 208).

¹⁸ Conversation with Sami, Rio de Janeiro, April 2010.

¹⁹ Interview with Marcelo, Mosque al-Nour, Rio de Janeiro, October 2010.

²⁰ Fictitious name.

²¹ Interview with Marcelo, Mosque al-Nour, Rio de Janeiro, October, 2nd 2010.

For a long time, SBMRJ was not inclined to accept foreign help. In 2006, however, the Association had re-established contact with the Arabic countries and started receiving financial help from Kuwait (Peres, 2006). This timeframe coincides with the augmentation of the community and the perception of the need of a mosque in Rio. Still, SBMRJ does not count with patronage of a specific country, receiving funding from Islamic institutions situated in different places²². This funding strategy allows the mosque to keep its ideological autonomy, contrary to Curitiba's mosque, for example, which became a mixed Sunni-Shia mosque after receiving donations from Iran²³. Rather than aligning itself with one of the self-determined Islamic States, Rio's Association constructs international loyalties around references that are more ideological than geographically situated.

In 2006, SBMRJ succeeded in buying a building for the future mosque, at the neighbourhood of Tijuca. The fact that several Muslims already resided in Tijuca played an important role in the choice of this specific neighbourhood²⁴. Though the *Saara* constitutes one of the few ethnic spaces broadly acknowledged as such in Rio de Janeiro, migrant communities possess their own "ethnic cartography" of the city, where they assign their regions of concentration (Pinto, 2010b: 148). In the case of the Arabs, in addition to the region of Rua da Alfândega, this cartography includes Tijuca²⁵. In addition to the Arab-descendant families established in this neighbourhood, some foreign Muslim students move there, guided by the proximity of the mosque. This way, Tijuca has intentionally become a gathering place for Muslims in Rio de Janeiro. The choice of this neighbourhood is also geographically consistent, as Tijuca is easily attained by bus and metro by those who live in Rio's other residential and

²² Resources donated by an Islamic institution in Kuwait allowed it to buy the land and build the mosque's first floor. Another Islamic institution which promotes education and which is situated in a different country financed the entire second floor. The 2008 international financial crisis, however, had direct effects on the mosque's building. When the funds ceased flowing, the building also stopped. The rain seeped through and badly damaged the second floor, which was almost entirely complete. In 2010, the SBMRJ leadership succeeded in reaching another foreign institution, which agreed to finance the construction of the third floor. Seizing this opportunity, they started the reconstruction of the mosque's second floor in October 2010.

²³ The community's mosque was constructed as a Sunni mosque in 1977 and remained so until 1986, when the government of Iran, in its politics of disputing with Saudi Arabia the funding and the control of international Islam, started giving important donations to the mosque and, soon, acquired the right of choosing its *shaykh* that became a Shia. The presence of Iran is immediately felt in the beautiful *mihrab* (niche that marks the direction of Mecca) of mosaic tiles in Persian style, with the inscription in Portuguese and in Arabic "Gift from the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1996" (Pinto, 2005: 235).

²⁴ According to Sami, up to one quarter of Rio's Islamic families live in the Great Tijuca area. Note that the space referred to as Grande Tijuca usually corresponds to an ensemble of neighbourhoods; also known as Zona Norte of the city of Rio de Janeiro (Melo, Leite & Franca, 2003).

²⁵ As well as other regions, notably Estácio, Copacaba, Inhaúma, Madureira, Santa Cruz and some regions of Baixada Fluminense (Paulo, 2010b: 148).

peripheral areas. Finally, the mosque's leaders attach importance to the fact that Tijuca is a residential area, in opposition to the Centro: as well as been accessible to the neighbourhood's residents, the Association intends to establish privileged links with its schools and libraries.

These considerations altogether make Tijuca correspond to the Islamizing posture the Association adopted in the past two decades. The street Gonzaga Bastos, where the mosque is situated, increases its accessibility, since this main urban artery binds Tijuca to Vila Isabel, another neighbourhood of the Great Tijuca area, providing easy access to inhabitants of the entire region. This street presents a particularity, notably the plurality of religious temples it hosts: adjacent to the mosque there is a catholic church, beside which is an evangelical church; in the other direction, crossing the street, there is a temple of afro-Brazilian religion *umbanda*. This does not seem to be a problem for the Muslim community, who leads what Marcelo describes as a "harmonious coexistence" with the other religions. When the Islamic community moved to Gonzaga Bastos, they followed what Sami calls "a good neighbouring policy": "we presented ourselves to the catholic as well as to the evangelic church". On a daily basis, the three religious communities do not entertain a relevant dialogue, although the construction works demand regular communication with the mosque's immediate neighbour, the catholic church: "Every construction is like this, it always creates disturbance for next-door neighbours... it [the construction] may break their tiles and all of that, but they [the catholic church members] are wonderful neighbours, they have never created any problem with us"²⁶. In what concerns the Evangelic church, the communication is unilateral: every now and then, the Pentecostals slide their religious folders under the mosque's front door, with the hope of converting their Muslim neighbours.

The building elected for the construction of the mosque used to be a one floor familial medicine factory, with a small space in its upper floor where father and son lived. In the Association, no importance is attached to this: no one seems aware of the construction's past, not even the engineer responsible for its conversion into a mosque. Clearly, there is the aspiration of a *tabula rasa*, where the construction's history starts with the foundation of the mosque. The chosen building had the advantage of offering a comfortable position for prayers, as its façade was already directed towards Mecca. In order to support the religious temple, though, significant changes had to be made in its structure:

There was the first floor and a small area constructed on the upper part of the roof, with about 60m². This small area was demolished, to become the second floor. We had to make the structural reinforcement of the roof, so it could support the construction. [...] We also created that

²⁶ Interview with the engineer responsible for the mosque's construction, March 2011.

area for the toilets, it didn't exist before [...] We had to make changes in the walls, to put up walls, windows, all of that [...] All the columns were reinforced because otherwise they could not stand the construction²⁷.

Brazilian with no Arab origins, the engineer responsible for the mosque's construction was selected by means of a bit promoted by SBMRJ. This is his first mosque, although it is not his first religious temple - he has already built a Pentecostal church in the district of Xerém²⁸. According to the engineer, constructing a mosque is unlike all his previous works: "the arched windows, the positioning of the bricks, the fact that the mosque has to be directed towards the Mecca, all this is new to me". Before the beginning of the construction, the Association handled him a project, which had been previously approved by the city hall. The adaptation of the building into a mosque required further negotiations with Rio's municipality: the project conceived corridors for the toilets and ablutions area on both sides of the building (one for men and another for women), and this implied the occupation of a larger space of the field than the allowed. Yet, SBMRJ's leadership managed to come to terms with the city hall and the ablution areas are already in place and functioning.

The mosque functions as a diffusion instrument itself, attracting the attention of passers-by and neighbourhood residents. Crowned by a cupola and minarets, it is aesthetically at odds with its urban environment, unquestionably and intentionally standing out in the neighbourhood and the city. This concern was explicit in the speech of the engineer when the building was being constructed:

I feel they give a lot of importance to the finishing and the minarets. It so is that when I finish the fourth floor and the minarets, I will travel to São Paulo, and maybe Foz do Iguaçu²⁹, to study the materials, the projects, the finishing, to evaluate what fits better here [...] For the president [of SBMRJ], it is extremely important that the mosque has great visibility. Precisely, with the finishing, the façade of granite, the minarets, you'll see. They will have this system of illumination, there is the sound... [the adhan]. All this is because for him it is very important that it is very visible.

Rio's mosque counts four floors. Imposing, it is higher than the Catholic and the Evangelical church. Indeed, SBMRJ aims at constructing a mosque that will clearly detach itself from other religious temples in the street and beyond. Competition between the scale and potency of religious temples can be observed

²⁷ *Idem*

²⁸ District in the municipality of Duque de Caxias in the state of Rio de Janeiro, about 50 km from the city of Rio de Janeiro.

²⁹ Cities with large concentrations of Sunni and Shia Muslim communities.

in different countries and religious communities, as revealed by the work of Ara Wilson (2008) on the shrines of Bangkok's markets, or yet Joseph Rustom (2011)'s study of religious buildings in post-war downtown Beirut. Differently from these cases, here it is not exactly a matter of competition between religious denominations over the urban space. That said, we can understand the Association's resolve in constructing a mosque of such dimensions as a form of marking its presence in an urban landscape where churches are explicitly dominant. After all, this is the city's only operational mosque³⁰, in a context where new Pentecostal churches seem to flourish in the streets - between the years of 1990 and 1992, the state of Rio de Janeiro counted the emergence of five evangelical churches per week³¹. This explains, at least partially, why an Association whose amount of devotees regularly frequenting its Friday Prayer is not superior than one hundred constructs a building with the capacity of hosting fifteen times this number.

In addition to the buildings concrete presence, other less evident elements "create, occupy and compete for urban space" (Witte, 2008: 690), notably sound. In the urban space, sound and music create what Martijn Oosterbaan (2006: 81-117) calls "politics of presence". Recently, different authors have approached the religious sonic presence in the city as competition for symbolic control of spaces (Oosterbann, 2006; Hervieu-Léger 2002; Corbin, 2000). At the street *Gonzaga Bastos*, the religious "soundscape"³² is mostly composed by the loud chanting of Evangelicals, especially on Sundays, when it pierces the walls of the church to penetrate the mosque³³. As De Witte argues, architecture has a great impact on the soundscape. This is explicit in the case of mosques, whose call for prayers are emitted from the top of minarets. In Rio, as the building is still under construction, the call for prayers takes place inside the mosque. Once the minarets are functional, the entire area will be submerged by an alien sound that, by its high degree of extraneity, will occupy the urban space with more force than other familiar sounds. At the moment, the aural sacred space established by the call for prayers and the prayers themselves is contained within the physical boundaries of the mosque, where they generate a very specific environment, helping create a feeling of belonging to the Muslim community³⁴.

SBMRJ's mosque marks the Muslims visual presence in the city's imagescape. In what concerns the architecture of the building, the Association's

³⁰ The one built in the neighbourhood of Jacarepaguá in the 1980s is closed due to disputes between the leadership of the community and the builder of the mosque (Pinto, 2010c: 4)

³¹ CIN - Census of the Institute of Religion Studies (ISER).

³² See Schafer, 1994.

³³ This does not constitute a problem for the Islamic community, though, given that its main prayer day is Friday.

³⁴ As historians and social scientists have recently demonstrated, soundscapes created, by different ways, shared senses of space and communities (Garrioch, 2003).

leadership showed the engineer images of exemplary mosques abroad, remarkably the Grand Mosque of Mecca. Motivated by a recent family trip to Syria and Lebanon, Arab descendants of the community transmitted him their ideas as well. Inspired by both national and international references, the mosque is being built in what they consider to be “Islamic architecture”. On her study of Rio’s Muslim community, Montenegro describes how, in the beginning of the 2000s, a group of intellectuals from SBMRJ carried out research in written sources and photographic archives, looking for remainders of an Islamic presence in Rio de Janeiro. The last phases of this work consisted in an empirical study of certain buildings of the *Centro*, which could prove the former existence of architecture with clear Islamic influences in the city³⁵. As the author specifies, this study was looking for the elements of an “Islamic”, not “Arab”, architecture – operating thus a “desarabization” and posterior “Islamization” of the buildings.

Whereas SBMRJ’s previous study was concerned about proving the continuity of a Muslim presence in the city’s history, the actual construction of the mosque aims at anchoring the Islamic presence in the urban space. Both initiatives insistence on the “Islamic architecture” are coherent with the Association’s missionary reorientation. They correspond to the local counterpart of a global discourse that refers itself to the idea of an “Islamic culture”. In fact, the apology of a “Muslim-civilisation” as Islam’s accomplishment, its perception as “a closed system that would explain itself from its own history”³⁶ can be found amongst Muslim communities and Arab intellectuals, as well as several studies of Muslim societies and Islamist political movements (Roy, 2002: 14). This line of thinking acknowledges the existence of a transnational community of believers, the *Ummah*. As Hamit Bozarslan (2005: 20) explains, whereas the *Ummah* does not exist under the form of a political or administrative entity, in the contemporary Muslim world it can be constituted as an imagined community.

The mosque provides Rio’s Muslim community with a concrete reference that, through its architecture, reassures its belonging to this ‘imagined community. Even though “mondialized Islam” is de-territorialized, as Olivier Roy (2002) argues, in the sense that it does not refer to any State or ethnicity in particular, my research indicates that the idea of an “Islamic architecture” characteristic of mosques worldwide binds Muslim communities by the means of

³⁵ The study aimed at proving the continuity of Islam in Brazil, notably in Rio de Janeiro. The empirical research was carried out by SBMRJ’s former president, who the author describes as a “studious of art and geometric forms derived from Arab calligraphy” (Montenegro, 2000: 200).

³⁶ Our translation for “(...) un système clos qui s’explique à partir de sa propre histoire” (Roy, 2002: 14).

tangible, locatable spaces, bringing into existence what I suggest we call “geography of the *Ummah*”³⁷.

The possibility of experiencing different global arenas offered by the Islamic religious system operates on a symbolical level, through the creation of transnational religious identifications (such as “Islamic architecture”) as well as on a more concrete level, by the establishment of networks of people and resources. The analysis of the funding of the mosque, for instance, revealed how, by putting the stress on belonging to the *Ummah* instead of acknowledging an Islamic State³⁸, SBMRJ creates operational networks with Islamic institutions worldwide which are ideologically close to it. Indeed, although the *Ummah* does not exist in the shape of a political or administrative unity, the circulation of people and resources gives it a tangible façade. Rio de Janeiro’s mosque constitutes a highly cosmopolitan space, in opposition to Pentecostal churches and the other religious temples converted Muslims most often frequented before adhering to Islam (i.e. Catholic churches, Spiritist centers and afro-Brazilian cult houses).

Rio de Janeiro’s Islamic community is formed by Arabs and their descendants (second and third generation migrants from Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories), African students and immigrants from different countries (as Burkina Faso, Senegal and South Africa), as well as Brazilian converts. In addition to being multiethnic, this religious community constantly receives the visit of foreign Muslims doing tourism or business in the city, as well as Islamic missionaries who share its religious views³⁹. The presence of these foreigners provides the local community with a tangible experience of belonging to a global community of Muslims. Let us mention, for instance, the case of João, a converted Muslim who was, for a short time, concierge at the mosque. João grew up in a favela and did not finish his high school studies. Before adhering to Islam - religion he discovered on the internet – João attended a *candomblé* house and earned his life doing tarot readings in a vegetarian restaurant at the city’s *Zona Sul*. Currently, he dedicates most of his time to the study of the religion as well as the Arabic language. The day a converted Japanese Muslim who was doing tourism in Rio visited the mosque, João asked

³⁷ At SBMRJ, the Grand Mosque is the main reference of “Islamic architecture”. It is not trivial that the image of this mosque is the wallpaper of all the computers I have seen in the Association and at the houses of its members.

³⁸ Indeed, SBMRJ adopts a conception of Islam that does not recognize the existence of Islamic States in contemporary times. Muslim communities that adopt this point of view consider that the true Islamic State existed only during the historical period of the four first caliphs, called exemplary or orthodox caliphs (Montenegro, 2002b).

³⁹ Let us notice that Rio’s Muslim community does not belong to any missionary network in particular. In SBMRJ the dominant tradition is Sallafiyya, “a Sunni reformist movement that emerged in the 19th century which preaches a return to the ‘original Islam’ codified in the Quran and the Hadith” (Pinto, 2010c).

me to join them and act as his interpreter, as he is not familiar with the English language. The conversation between the Japanese and him passed necessarily by the presence of a third person until the moment they decided to recite to each other the Quran surates they knew by heart. The Quran presents a very peculiar structure, given that it does not contain the description of God's words by a prophet or his disciples, but His own discourse, the words, syllables and sentences of Allah. Thus, one who chants the verses of the Quran is not chanting words about God, but, as these words are His essence, is chanting God himself (Geertz, 1983). João and the Japanese were both filled with emotion to realize that, although they could not have trivial conversations, they could understand each other in the most important register of their lives, the sacred one. Sharing a common faith expressed in a common language approached a Brazilian man and a Japanese girl who feel their own compatriots fail to understand them. Their encounter reinforced the feeling of belonging to a religious community at the same time it acted as proof that belonging to the *Ummah* is more relevant than any boundary created by men, such as ethnicity, nationality or social class.

2. SBMRJ'S ACTIONS ON RIO'S URBAN AND MEDIA SPACE

On the morning of April 7th 2011, an armed man entered an elementary school in *Realengo*⁴⁰, killing 12 children and seriously wounding 20 others. It was the first time an event of this nature occurred in Brazil. The local media and the shocked population rapidly suspected the killer of belonging to a Muslim group: there were rumours he defined himself as a Muslim; his sister declared to the police he frequented an Islamic worship place downtown Rio de Janeiro⁴¹; the perpetrator of the crime left behind a letter inspired from testaments written by suicide-bombers of Islamist ideology and diffused on the Internet. An Islamist threat seemed even more palpable as the previous week the country's most read magazine, *Veja*⁴², had dedicated its front cover to the theme "Islamist networks in Brazil". In view of this situation, SBMRJ was not long to react. A few hours after the incident, Sami gave an interview to *Radio Globo*, declaring his concern about the impact of these accusations:

First of all, he was not a Muslim, he did not frequent the mosque here in Rio de Janeiro, and nobody recognizes him as a Muslim. [...] The second point is that we were all shocked with this massacre and at the same time worried about the things the media has started showing,

⁴⁰ Neighbourhood situated at the western fringe of Rio de Janeiro.

⁴¹ 11th April 2011, "Muçulmanos se dizem hostilizados após tragédia em Realengo", O Globo Rio. <http://oglobo.globo.com/rio/muculmanos-se-dizem-hostilizados-apos-tragedia-em-realengo-2798056> Date of access: 18th December 2017.

⁴² Environ 1.098.642 numbers sold per week; more than twice the second most read magazine in Brazil, *Época*, with environ 417.798 numbers. Source: "Os dez mais", Luiz André Alzer and Mariana Claudino, Editora Agir, 2008.

linking this act with Islam, with Muslims [...] The historic of these events in schools, in the United States, shows most of the time they were made by Christians and [however] they have never been associated to Christianity⁴³.

The priority was to untie the confusion between the assassin and Islam. Afterwards, it was necessary to reassure the society of the religion's peaceful nature. Only after that, it was possible to alert Brazilians about the danger of stigmatizing the country's Muslim community. This pattern repeated itself in all interviews accorded to the media by members of the different Muslim institutions in the country. The spokesperson of Brazil's Muslim community and president of the Ethical Union of National Islamic Entities in Brazil, Sheikh Jihad Hassan Hammadeh, participated in a program of Brazil's public television channel, TV Brazil⁴⁴. As Sami, he denounced an unfair treatment towards Islam in comparison to other religions. One week after the incident, Sheikh Jihad and Sheikh Yanis (spiritual leader of Rio's mosque at the time) participated in an ecumenical ceremony at the place of the incident, where representatives of different religions symbolically embraced the school. They expressed the profound regrets of the Muslim community, reassuring Brazilian society by affirming Islam condemns all kinds of violence. On the Friday following the incident, Sheikh Jihad visited Rio de Janeiro's mosque. After the prayers and the sermon that traditionally follows (known as *khutbah*), he picked up the microphone and talked about the importance of one's character, reminding the local community each one of them was responsible for the image of Islam in Brazil. Such reminder was necessary to the extent that those who could be recognized as Muslims in the streets – notably the veiled women – were object of threats and aggressions from stunned passers-by who identified them with the shooting and, beyond, with global acts of terrorism⁴⁵.

As in the case related above, the Association's leadership first concern is to undo and clarify the prejudices and stereotypes about Muslims. This allows them to go further and present Islam as a possibility of religious conversion to the Brazilian public. When approached by passers-by, for example, the veiled women are expected not only to react with courtesy (since they represent the religion) but, as far as possible, to discourse about Islam and invite their interlocutors to visit the Association's mosque and website.

⁴³ <http://radioglobo.gloradio.globo.com/boa-tarde-globo/2011/04/07/ESCLARECENDO-SOBRE-A-RELIGIAO.htm> Date of access: 15th April 2011.

⁴⁴ 11th April 2011, Program *Sem censura*, TV Brasil.

⁴⁵ "Whereas in predominantly Muslim countries the use of the veil is, *a priori*, a way for women to keep a low profile and cover their sensual attributes in the city's space of visibility – in Rio de Janeiro, its high degree of extraneity triggers great attention." (Dias, 2013: 506).

Veiled women are one of the most visible elements of Islam in the city, and the Association's leadership is well aware that the urban space is conducive to the recruitment process (Furseth, 2011). Indeed, SBMRJ coordinates activities where the body is conceived as an instrument for missionary work. Its commemoration of *Eid el-Fitr*⁴⁶ in 2010 is a good example of this: after the performance of communal prayer (*Eid salat*) and a joyful breaking of the fast at the mosque, several members of the community proceeded to a collective blood donation. They walked together to a hospital nearby, wearing a t-shirt where we could read "Give Blood. In Islam, to save a life is like saving all humanity". At the back of the t-shirt, there was an indication of the Association's website. During the walk, people stared at and sometimes stopped the passers-by, curious to learn more about this group and their religion. We can also mention the Association's participation in the "March against Religious Intolerance" the same year. At this occasion, the participants wore t-shirts saying "Islam. Respecting religious diversity" and an inscription of the Association's website address on the back. The women were veiled and some men adopted what they perceive as "Islamic clothing": caps, turbans, tunics and so on⁴⁷. Such clothing intrigued other participants of the March. As Orsi (1999: 49) writes, "it is through style - through the intricate intentionalities of public self-representation, and especially through style in religion - that city people have made meanings and impressed those meanings on themselves and others [...] and have presented themselves at the borders and junctures of adjacent urban social worlds". Indeed, whereas some Muslims wear Islamic symbols on a daily basis, the March constituted a privileged platform to display their religious belonging. At the occasion of the March, the visibility of the Muslim community was amplified by its diffusion in several media supports, such as newspapers, television and internet.

Dawa can be practised by several means and the SBMRJ has developed different strategies of using the city's space to accomplish it. As we have seen, the construction of the mosque itself contributes to the practice of *dawa* in the city, as the extraneity of its architecture attracts the curiosity of Tijuca's urban dwellers. Another way the Association invests Rio's urban space is through the establishment of what they call "*dawa* table". Since 2009, the SBMRJ, in partnership with the Federation of Muslim Associations in Brazil (FAMBRAS), installs a "*dawa* table" at Square *Saens Peña*, in *Tijuca*, and another one at the Square *Uruguaiana*, downtown Rio. Both emplacements are major circulation spaces of the city. With the objective of diffusing their religion and dispelling wrong ideas about it, members of the Muslim community freely distribute

⁴⁶ Celebration that marks the end of Ramadan.

⁴⁷ For an analysis of the adoption of these elements by Muslims in Rio de Janeiro, see Dias, 2013: 508.

publications about Islam. The books are donated by a public Islamic institution in Egypt⁴⁸, whose members visit Rio in order to help the local Muslim community accomplish the missionary work. Rodrigo, a young “carioca” who frequented a Pentecostal Church, converted after reading “Jesus, a Prophet of Islam”⁴⁹, which he received as he was leaving the metro station *Saens Peña* on his way home in 2009. The following year, Rodrigo was part of the team distributing the books.

In 2011, the Muslim community enlarged, so to speak, the scope of its “*dawa* table”, by participating with FAMBRAS at Rio de Janeiro’s 15th Book Biennale at *Riocentro*, the city’s most important convention centre. Members of SBMRJ actively offered the books at a stand that simulated the façade of a mosque. The orientalist appeal of the stand attracted thousands of visitors: at the total, 10.000 books and pamphlets on Islam were distributed. The participation at the Biennale was part of a national wide campaign⁵⁰ designed to increase the awareness of Islam in the Brazilian society and diminish the negative image of the religion (one of the panels explained the “real” meaning of the term Jihad as “inner spiritual fight”, giving as example Gandhi and Mandela and denouncing the attacks of 9/11 as a terrorist act, together with the Holocaust and the Hiroshima bombs. Ultimately, the participation in the biennale was also aimed at attracting new conversions amongst Brazilian Christians. The willing to communicate to this public was synthesized in the bookmark distributed at the occasion: “I know the Bible. Do you know the Quran?”. In addition to the freely distributed books, it was possible to buy those published by SBMRJ. The authors of these books are Sami and his brother Munzer, who both underwent three years of Islamic studies in Saudi Arabia. Their books, which approach different aspects of Islam, are printed by a publishing company owned by one of the Association’s members and consultant, under a label specifically created for the publication of Islamic works, *Azaan*. The *dawa* books the Association receives for free distribution as well as the ones published under the label *Azaan* are continuously available at a table installed at the back of the mosque’s first floor.

Two main elements contribute to the rise of the number of conversions to Islam in Rio de Janeiro: its growing visibility in the city and the new relations Muslim communities have established with Brazilian society⁵¹. As we saw, SBMRJ has improved Islam’s visibility in the city, using Rio’s urban space as a privileged arena for its *dawa* practice. It has also created different dialogue

⁴⁸ These books are continuously available at the mosque. The Islamic institution in Egypt publishes divulgation material about Islam in different languages and diffuses them around the world. It sends them to SBMRJ without benefits.

⁴⁹ Book that, along with “The woman in Islam”, knows the biggest amongst the Brazilian public.

⁵⁰ This was part of FAMBRAS campaign “Know Islam”.

⁵¹ The communities where dialogue with Brazilian society has not been created, such as Foz do Iguaçu, reported no increase in the number of conversions (Pinto, 2010).

channels with the non-Muslim Brazilians, such as the course on Arabic language and introduction to Islam. This course, which has been in place since 1993, corresponds to the Association's first step towards the Brazilian public⁵². It is composed by one hour and a half of Arabic language⁵³ followed by another hour and a half of introduction to Islam. In between, there is a short pause, during which the Muslims realize the *Maghrib* prayer⁵⁴. As the lessons currently take place at the mosque's only functional floor, the students silently observe the devotees' pray in the mat situated in front of their set of chairs, specifically installed there for the course. The fact that one desiring to learn Arabic must also follow the classes on Islam, in addition to the fact that the lessons evolve in a prayer atmosphere, create a situation propitious for conversion, even though this is not announced as the course's main goal. In fact, whereas the Association aims at making Islam one more possibility of conversion in Rio's religious circuit, it insists on the non proselytising aspect of the religion. Differently from Pentecostals, Muslims do not explicitly assume their missionary character. Instead, in their discourse, the priority is to dispel misrepresentations of Islam, the conversion of Brazilians appearing as a potential outcome of this. This way, on the first day of the course, Sami announced: "our main objective is to correct wrong ideas about Islam, not to Islamise people. Media talks about suicide bombers, etc: it's already in the collective subconscious. It's the opposite of Islam, which word derives from peace. [...] Of course, if at the end some of you wish to convert, you are most welcome"⁵⁵. This year, a group of 41 people, composed by different social classes and cultural backgrounds, attended the course. Their motivations varied from doing tourism in Muslim countries to appreciating Arab cuisine. Some were enthused by the re-airing of the soap-opera *O Clone*⁵⁶, while others simply wanted to learn the language. That said, 2011 was the first year in the story of the course that a majority of students

⁵² In 2011, the Association promoted, previously to the course, a cycle of conferences on the life of the Prophet. Their public was composed by an eclectic group of about 60 people, men and women confounded. Opened to the public, the conferences allowed the Association to reach a larger spectrum of people. They were also a platform to announce and introduce the course itself, which started mid-March, right after Carnival. The course was diffused at the carioca newspaper *O Globo*, at local neighbourhood newspapers, at SBMRJ's website as well as other Islamic sites and blogs.

⁵³ SBMRJ's leadership encourages the mosque's Brazilian converts to learn Arabic because of its intrinsic religious value, rather than its ethnical aspect.

⁵⁴ The *Maghrib* is the fourth of the five obligatory Muslim daily prayers (*salat*). It is performed just after the sunset.

⁵⁵ 26/02/2011, Sami's introduction to the course. Mosque. Saturday Conference

⁵⁶ Originally shown in 2001-2002, this popular Brazilian soap opera was broadcasted for the second time in 2011 by Brazil's largest television channel, Globo. It dramatizes the saga of a Moroccan family living in Brazil. Adopting a romanticized and Orientalist approach to the Islamic religion, *O Clone* greatly influenced the perception of Islam in this country, contributing to an increase in the number of conversions. For an analysis of the impacts of *O Clone* in Brazil, see Montenegro, 2004.

declared their main interest relied on the religion itself⁵⁷. By the end of the course, two students had become Muslims.

A way SBMRJ increases both the visibility of Islam and its dialogue with the society is by making itself present in the city's communication vehicles and virtual arena. In fact, the Association regularly prepares systematized discourses to be diffused on its internet website or local publications, which aim at providing the Brazilian public with an alternate image of the religion (Montenegro, 2002a). In 2010, the Association put in place a monthly newsletter that it distributes inside the mosque and at some points of Tijuca (for example, at the neighbouring restaurant that advertises in it). Recently, SBMRJ has made progress in gaining space on national wide established means of communication. Since 2009, TV Globo, Brazil's most prominent television channel, airs a series celebrating the country's religious diversity. Islam is part of the program, together with five other religions⁵⁸. During the second season of the series (2010-2011), Sami was the spiritual leader responsible for exposing the religion's view on a variety of topics. Along with spiritual leaders of other religions, he also has a permanent space at the national newspaper Extra's blog⁵⁹. In fact, Rio's Muslim community embraces each opportunity of visibility in Rio de Janeiro's communication channels. In addition to its regular communication strategies, the Association promptly responds to invitations to accord interviews to the radio and television, as well as to give lectures at schools and other educational institutions. Aware of the importance of having a positive public image in 2009 SBMRJ offered its members rhetoric lessons, to ensure they have a good performance when communicating with the press. Allowing scientific research in its grounds may also be understood as a means of fighting stigmatization and, eventually, attracting new conversions. In addition, the Association leaders participate regularly on events promoted for interreligious debates and fight against religious intolerance.

Last but not least, the SBMRJ leaders seek actively to render the Brazilian environment more favourable to Islam followers. In 2015, they put together a document named "Islamophobic: real and virtual", with over 100 pages reporting attacks to physical persons, mosques and virtual harassment. This document was handed to several Brazilian authorities and one of its outcomes is that in 2016 the Federal Justice demanded *Google* to delete 23 videos insulting

⁵⁷ Interview with Marcelo, mosque, March 2011.

⁵⁸ Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Afro-Brazilian *Umbanda*, Judaism and Buddhism.

⁵⁹ <http://extra.globo.com/noticias/religiao-e-fe/sami-isabelle/> This is an initiative of the commission against religious intolerance. Sami inaugurated the blog by clarifying Islam is not "the religion of Arabs". Date of access: 18th December 2017.

Islam and its followers⁶⁰. In March 2017, “carioca” Muslims celebrated one more victory: Rio de Janeiro’s state justice (*Procuradoria Geral do Rio de Janeiro*)⁶¹ issued an opinion declaring that the state’s residents can henceforth wear, in their identity documents’ photographs, turbans, hats, veils or any other head cover for religious reasons.

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⁶⁰ <http://www.mpf.mp.br/rj/sala-de-imprensa/noticias-rj/mpf-google-e-condenada-por-videos-de-intolerancia-religiosa-na-internet> Date of access: 18th December 2017.

⁶¹ <http://www.oabRJ.org.br/noticia/106684-cariocas-podem-usar-turbantes-ou-veus-na-carteira-de-identidade> Date of access: 18th December 2017.

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