

Amanda Dias: The Islamic presence in Brazil and in Rio de Janeiro

According to historical-sociological literature, Islam first arrived in Brazil in the 18th century, when slaves from Islamized regions of Western Africa were brought to the country (Reis, 2003). During the 19th century, as syncretism with Catholicism as well as other African religions occurred, those first Islamic communities started to decline, and disappeared completely by the middle of the 20th century. (Rodrigues, 2004 [1906]).

At the same time that Islam of African origin vanished, a new Muslim presence arrived in Brazil, through diverse migration waves from the Middle East. Although mainly composed by Christians, they led to the creation of Muslim communities in the country. The Islamic presence increased in the 1970s, with the arrival of Muslims who had left their countries due to the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and the continuous occupation of the Palestinian Territories (Pinto, 2010). Although the majority of Muslims in Brazil are Arab migrants and their descendants, in the last decades a growing number of non-Arab Brazilians who converted to Islam have contributed to the formation of an Islamic community in the country.

Islam holds a minor place within the Brazilian religious field, in which Christianity prevails. The 2000 census numbers 27.239 Muslims in the country. With a significant difference from the census numbers, local Muslim religious authorities mention about 1 to 2 million Muslims. Based on his ethnographic experience, Brazilian anthropologist Paulo Pinto estimates the number of 1 million a more plausible approximation.

Muslim communities in Brazil are predominantly urban (99,4% against 74,6% for the totality of Brazilians) with large concentrations in the states of São Paulo, Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul and Rio de Janeiro (Waniez & Brustlein, 2001). Most of the Shiite communities are located in São Paulo and the South Region of Brazil, notably Curitiba and Foz do Iguaçu. Sunnite 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* - SBM). The oldest one was created in São Paulo in 1929. It was also São Paulo’s Islamic Mutual-Aid Association that built the first mosque in the country, the *Mesquita Brasil* (Brazil Mosque), with donations from the Egyptian monarchy. Although its construction started in 1942, the *Mesquita Brasil* was not to be inaugurated before 1960. For a long time, it remained the main institutional reference for both Sunni and Shiite 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. In 2002, Brazilian anthropologist Silvia Montenegro counted 58 Muslim organizations throughout the country. They represent the larger international panel of Islamic sectarian divisions: 90% of them are Sunnites and 10% Shiites.

The construction of Islamic worship places in Brazil did not really start before the 1980s. From then, several mosques – mainly Sunnites - were built in the states of Paraná, São Paulo, Mato Grosso, Goiás and Minas Gerais. Constructed with Islamic architectural details, they were a response to the increase of the number of Arab migrants. In fact, until the beginning of the 21st century, Mutual-Aid Associations of the different Muslim communities were mainly concerned with the transmission of cultural traditions to Arab descendants (Pinto, 2010).

If Islam remained for a long time “a religion of immigrants, an ethnic or nearly ethnic religion” (Peres, 2006: 4), the construction of mosques allowed the religious aspect of Muslim institutions to develop in importance in relation to their function as a space of sociability for the Islamic community of Arab origins (Pinto, 2010). Over the last few years we have witnessed an increase of the number of conversions among Brazilians who do not have Muslim ancestry.

This is particularly true in the case of Rio de Janeiro, where 80% of the Muslim community is composed of non-Arab Brazilians converted to Islam. In fact, Rio de Janeiro’s Muslim population presents a peculiar sociological composition when compared to other Islamic communities in Brazil. Whereas the latter are mainly composed of Arabs and their descendants, the formation of Rio's Muslim community is more recent, and largely consists of Brazilians who are not inscribed in a lineage of Arabic ancestors. As a result, it does not tend to associate the Arab ethnical and Islamic religious identities, contrarily to what happens in other Brazilian cities (Montenegro, 2002; Peres, 2006; Pinto, 2010b). Here, more than elsewhere in the country, the idea of Islam as an “ethnic-religious” minority is to be relativized.

Rio’s Muslim community has its religious centre in the Islamic Mutual-Aid Association (SBMRJ). As a matter of fact, the high number of conversions in Rio is due to this Association’s local history and own internal processes. Created in 1951, the SBMRJ belongs to the Sunnite branch of Islam. Until recently, the Association’s activities took place in a prayer hall (*musalla*) in central Rio. As Marcelo¹, a young Brazilian converted to Islam, who is responsible for the mosque’s communication area, explains:

¹ Fictitious name.

They [the initiators of SBMRJ] rented two rooms in a commercial building. It 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 Brazilians².

For a long time, SBMRJ remained almost exclusively a space of congregation for the born Muslims, who gathered in the prayer hall mainly for the Friday Prayers and *Eid* celebrations³. This began to change in the 1990s, when 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 (*dawa*) is “a religious obligation”, in 1993 the leadership of SBMRJ decided that efforts should be made towards Brazilians, and created a course of introduction to Islam and Arabic language. This attitude contrasted clearly with the position adopted by the Muslim leadership in São Paulo, whose efforts remained focused on those who bear Islam as a cultural heritage (Peres, 2006).

Over time, the SBMRJ leadership efforts began to bear fruits. Rio's Islamic community grew in such a way that, by the year 2000, the *musalla* had become too small for those attending the Friday Prayer. Marcelo presents the augmentation of the community, along with the social changes that took place in Rio's centre as the main elements that led to the necessity to build a mosque:

The community grew a lot and the *musalla* became too small. On Fridays, we had to split in two different shifts for the prayers. It was also because of its location. From 1951 to 2000 many changes had taken place in Rio's centre. It had become a point of prostitution, a dangerous area. So we needed another place, bigger and safer.

SBMRJ leadership started looking for the foreign resources that would allow them to undertake the building of the mosque. They also had to choose where it would be located. Having decided for the residential neighbourhood of Tijuca and with the fundings in hands, they finally succeeded in buying the building for the mosque in 2006. Since 2007, the city's first mosque is under construction⁴.

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

³ The *Eid el-Kebir* and *Eid el-Fitr* are Islam's two only authentically sacred celebrations.

⁴ As Pinto explains, “this is the only mosque currently operating in Rio de Janeiro, for 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, 2010b: 4).

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